

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: MYTH AND THE MATERNAL VOICE  
MEDIATION IN THE POETRY OF VENUS KHOURY-GHATA

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Born under the French Mandate in Lebanon, Paris-based Francophone poet and novelist Vénus Khoury-Ghata represents a generation of Lebanese writers who have witnessed Lebanon's evolution from a newly independent state to a twenty-first century nation struggling to survive the devastation of civil war and regional conflict. Like many of her compatriots who have chosen exile and whose mother tongue is Arabic, Khoury-Ghata's negotiation between two languages and cultures nurtures an oeuvre that reflects the tensions and provocations of a dual Franco-Lebanese identity. An examination of her poetry represents an opportunity to direct more attention to a poet whose passionate representation of her native country and the pathos of the human figure memorializes in verse personal and collective tragedy.

Khoury-Ghata's narrative-driven poems reveal the dynamics of accommodating differences by promoting encounter and integration, while recognizing that confrontation is not entirely unavoidable. Seeking to reconcile the distance and the passage of time that separate the poet from her origins, as well as linguistic and cultural differences that divide self and society, her approach evokes the contemporary poet's quest for a

*rapprochement*, however ephemeral, with the Other, often in the context of an autobiographical project that merges History and myth.

Her consistent evocation in writing and interviews of her dual identity invites an examination of her verse in the framework of theoretical notions based on binary structures. Informed by surrealist and magical realist strategies, as well as French and Arab poetic legacies, Khoury-Ghata's verse expresses a paradigm of inversion that renders the common narrative fantastic, transforms the ordinary housewife into a supernatural heroine, and sanctifies the abject.

Evocations of language and myth affiliated with this subversive dynamic encourage the investigation of their significance in the framework of binary structures that privilege the negative and the nocturnal. Julia Kristeva's theory of poetic language provides one method for the analysis of Khoury-Ghata's portrayal of the maternal figure and maternal language as negative and subversive feminine forces. This study will underscore how the poet's integration into her text of signifiers of Arabic, orality, and pre-verbal impulses, weaves the maternal voice and gestures into a mythical narrative.

In addition, French myth critics such as Gilbert Durand and Pierre Brunel propose various reflections on the development of mythical structures, archetypes, and themes, whose evocations in Khoury-Ghata's verse underscore a poetic strategy of the recovery and revival of her Lebanese origins linked to a broader Mediterranean culture. Durand's isotopic classification of images according to a dichotomous paradigm of the diurnal and nocturnal throws into relief the archetype of the nocturnal *Grande déesse* whose enigmatic (re)productive power suggests correspondences with the maternal dynamic in

Kristeva's semiotic theory, as well as the surrealist *médiatrice*, and Wendy Faris' conception of the mystical feminine in magical realist strategies.

The theme of mediation persists in the poet's mythico-poetic approach that promotes the contact and fusion of contrary forces in diverse “narratives in verse” representing cosmogonic myth, the myth of the primitive Other, biomythography, folktale and fable, and the interaction of myth and memoir. This inquiry demonstrates the durability and plasticity of binary structures of myth and language that mediate personal and collective identities challenged by the potential polarization of languages, cultures, and genders.

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by

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## **Myth and the Maternal Voice Mediation in the Poetry of Vénus Khoury-Ghata**

### Introduction

Lebanon, an Arab Mediterranean country scarred by modern civil war and contemporary regional conflicts, has produced numerous Francophone writers inspired by the volatility and complexity of a country in which seventeen religious communities coexist and the languages of Arabic, French, and English, mingle freely.<sup>1</sup> Over the past four decades, Paris-based Francophone Lebanese poet and novelist Vénus Khoury-Ghata has established an oeuvre of over thirty collections of poetry and novels that express the tensions of living between two languages and cultures. She explains in one interview how she arrived at a resolution:

Les années venues j'ai conclu un armistice avec la langue française et décidé de la réunir dans un même moule avec mon arabe maternel. Ainsi, devenues une langue unique, le français et l'arabe sont sous-jacents l'un à l'autre comme dans les strates des carrières de pierre.<sup>2</sup>

An examination of Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre represents an opportunity to direct more scholarly attention to a poet whose passionate representation of her native country and the pathos of the human figure reflects the conciliatory and provocative dimensions

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<sup>1</sup> Contemporary anthologies of Francophone Lebanese poets and novelists include Katia Haddad's La Littérature francophone du Machrek. (Beyrouth: Presses Université Saint-Joseph, 2000), Ramy Zein's Dictionnaire de la littérature libanaise de langue française (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), and Najwa Aoun Anhoury's Panorama de la poésie d'expression française (Beyrouth: Dar al-Machreq) 1987. D'encre et d'exil, a literary program sponsored by the Bibliothèque Centre Pompidou, 1-3 December 2006, introduces 25 Lebanese writers.

<sup>2</sup> John Stout's interview with Khoury-Ghata appears in L'Enigme-poésie: Entretiens avec 21 poètes françaises, a manuscript soon to be published by Rodopi Press in Amsterdam. 308.

of a dual identity.

Khoury-Ghata, now in her seventies, is one of the most prolific Arab Francophone women writers of her generation. Her poetry has won prestigious awards in France: the Prix Mallarmé in 1987 for Monologue du mort, the Prix Apollinaire in 1980 for Les Ombres et leurs cris, the Grand Prix de la Société des Gens de Lettres for Fables pour un peuple d'argile, and the 2002 Prix Supervielle for Anthologie personnelle. Marilyn Hacker's English translation of Elle dit (She says) was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Khoury-Ghata's novel Le Moine, l'ottoman et la femme du grand argentier received the Prix Baie des Anges. Sept pierres pour la femme adultère was on the final list for the Prix Renaudot in 2008. Khoury-Ghata's poetry and novels have been translated into numerous languages, including English, Arabic, Dutch, Russian, and Italian. She has also served on numerous literary juries, including the Max Jacob, Mallarmé, and Cinq Continents prizes. In addition to figuring in the Lebanese anthologies already cited, Khoury-Ghata's stature as a poet is recognized in anthologies of French and Arab poetry such as Edition Gallimard's Anthologie de la poésie française du XXe siècle, (2000), Mary Ann Caws' Yale Anthology of Twentieth-Century French Poetry (2004), Michael Bishop's Women: Poetry in France 1965-1995, and the Arab-American poet Nathalie Handal's The Poetry of Arab Women, (2001).

Several doctoral dissertations in English and in French have examined some of her novels; however, to my knowledge, no one has addressed her extensive collection of

poetry.<sup>3</sup> This reflects a broader problem regarding the scarcity of scholarship on contemporary women poets of French expression. John Stout's bibliography in L'Enigme-poésie: Entretiens avec 21 poètes françaises, lists six anthologies of French women poets, including Bishop's highly recommended bilingual anthology; however, it indicates that few critical studies have been published. Marie-Claire Bancquart, Andrée Chedid, and Jeanne Hyvrard are among the few women poets whose works have been the subject of detailed critical studies.

On the other hand, the classification of poets by gender does not necessarily sit well with many French women poets, according to Stout, who conducted interviews with twenty-one women poets, including Khoury-Ghata, over the course of a decade, 1996-2006. He concedes:

“Aucune femme interviewée dans ce livre n’accepte cette appellation pour décrire son travail de poète. Elles estiment que l’idée de 'la poésie féminine' aurait une pertinence limitée, sinon nulle comme outil critique. Il s’agit, disent-elles, d’une catégorie trompeuse qui, même, ne veut rien dire (...). ‘La poésie féminine’ serait soit un piège, soit un pur cliché. Voici le paradoxe de ce projet: il propose que la ‘poésie féminine’ n’existe pas” (8).

With all due respect to these poets who resist being identified with "la poésie féminine," this examination of Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre is intended to contribute to the development of one fertile and unexplored terrain of women's poetry.

The poetry critic and translator Michael Bishop, who steadfastly advocates the

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<sup>3</sup> The dissertations of Anne-Sophie Riquier and Elizabeth Tanya Antoun address novels of Khoury-Ghata and other twentieth-century Lebanese women writers. Sara Gaillard examines novels by Khoury-Ghata and several North African writers. See my bibliography for dissertation titles.

study of contemporary French women poets in translations and reviews, includes an essay on Khoury-Ghata in Contemporary French Women Poets, Volume 2 (1995) that thus far represents a rare collection of critical essays on French women poets.<sup>4</sup> His conclusion names Khoury-Ghata as one of the sixteen poets in his study who generate a “powerful socio-ethical vision (...) in a massive ontological and spiritual chiasma of the greatest urgency for our equations of individuality and collectivity, selfdom and otherness, discontinuity and universality or cosmicity” (162).

Furthermore, he links the approach of all of the poets of his study to the “doubt, anguish, fragmentation, deformation” that constitutes a “kind of negative vision” that he describes as “sombrevoyance.” Bishop adds, “a vision not just logical or theoretical, but experienced in that moment (...) when darkness, obscurity, is luminosity (...)” (165). Bishop’s determination of a common poetic terrain nurtured by an ethical vision and negative forces will be more precisely developed in my study that will identify specific structures of language and myth germane to what I will reveal as the emphatic nocturnal dimension of Khoury-Ghata's poetry. Before outlining my approach and the organization of my dissertation, I offer the following resume of Khoury-Ghata's biography as an important reference.

### Biography

Fragments of Vénus Khoury-Ghata’s biographical information are available in her autobiographical novels Une Maison au bord des larmes (1998) and La Maison aux orties

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Bishop, Contemporary French Women Poets, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1994-95). The essay on Khoury-Ghata appears in Vol. II, 82-99.

(2006), as well as in translator Marilyn Hacker's introductions to Here There Was Once a Country (2001), She says (2003), and Nettles (2008). Interviews with Khoury-Ghata in print and on the web also provide biographical details. The basic facts are as follows: Vénus Khoury-Ghata was born in 1937 in Lebanon to Maronite parents. Her father had abandoned a career in the church to marry her mother, a nurse whom he had met during a stay in the hospital. Khoury-Ghata refers to her mother as illiterate and her father as an educated man and devoted Francophile who worked as an interpreter under the French Mandate. They had three daughters and one son. The family resided in Beirut, where Vénus attended school. During her childhood, Khoury-Ghata and her siblings spent summers in Bcherré, a mountain village in North Lebanon where her aunt and uncle lived. The celebrated Lebanese writer Gibran Khalil Gibran is entombed there. Gibran and the simple, rustic life of Bcherré serve as sources of inspiration.

Khoury-Ghata dotes on the memory of her brother, Victor, whom she describes as an aspiring, talented poet in his youth. She portrays him as being the target of her father's frustration and ire due to his failure to meet his father's expectations. She recounts how their aunt financed Victor's voyage to Paris where he intended to launch his writing career; however, he became a drug addict, and returned home to Lebanon, where he led a bohemian existence. His unconventional behaviour provoked his father to commit him to a psychiatric asylum, where he spent most of life. This family drama haunts Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre, which depicts her father as an oppressive tyrant, her mother as a submissive suffering housewife, and her brother as a martyred son. In her writing and interviews, she alludes to having taken up the vocation of writing in her

brother's stead. She also describes herself emerging from the family cocoon by competing in local beauty contests, which culminated in her winning the title of Miss Beirut. She subsequently married a wealthy Christian Lebanese businessman with whom she had two sons and one daughter.

Khoury-Ghata developed her writing skills as a journalist and published her first collection of poetry, Les Visages inachevés, in Lebanon in 1966, followed by Terres Stagnantes in 1969. Her first novel, Les Inadaptés, was published in 1971. She subsequently divorced and left her family in Lebanon, and moved to Paris in 1972 to marry Jean Ghata, a scientist. When Lebanon's civil war erupted, Khoury-Ghata, driven by images of violence that she witnessed from France, continued to publish. The poetry of Au sud du silence, Les Ombres et leurs cris, and Qui parle au nom du jasmin appeared in 1975, 1979, and 1981, respectively. In the same time frame, she published three novels, Dialogue à propos d'un Christ ou d'un acrobate, Le Fils empaillé, and Alma cousue main. In the 1980s, the death of her husband, Jean, weighed heavily on Khoury-Ghata, who was left alone to raise their only daughter, Yasmine. During this period, the theme of death prevails in her two books of poetry, Un faux pas du soleil (1982) and Monologue du mort (1986), as well as the novels, Vacarme pour une lune morte, Les morts n'ont pas d'ombre, and Mortemaison. In the late 1980s, the titles of her work suggest a change of mood with a touch of the exotic in the poetry of Leçon d'arithmétique au grillon (1985) and Fables pour un peuple d'argile (1987), and the novels, Bayarmine (1987), and Les Fugues d'Olympia (1989).

The 1990s, which witnessed a more stable Lebanon, represent an enormously

productive decade for Khoury Ghata, who published five collections of poetry, three of which reconstituted verses that appear in preceding works, Ils, illustrated by the renowned Chilean-born artist Matta<sup>5</sup> (1996), Mon Anthologie (published in Lebanon in 1993), Anthologie personnelle (1997), Elle dit (1999), and La Voix des arbres (1999). Equally well received were her novels, La Maîtresse du notable (1992), Les Fiancées du Cap Ténès (1995), La Maestra (1996), and her first explicitly autobiographical novel, Une maison au bord des larmes (1998).

The arrival of the new millennium added the following collections of poetry: Compassion des pierres (2001), Alphabet de sable, illustrated by Matta (2001), Version des oiseaux (2001), Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits (2004), and Les Obscurcis (2008), the latter of which features two new sequences of poems along with previously published verse. She produced a collection of short stories in Zarifé la folle (2001) and the novels Privilège des morts (2001), La Moine, l'ottoman et la femme du grand argentier (2004), her second autobiographical novel La Maison aux orties (2006), Sept pierres pour la femme adultère (2007), and finally, La Revenante (2009).

For the purposes of this study, one should note that Marilyn Hacker's English translations of verse include Here There Was Once a Country (2001), She says (2003), Nettles (2008), and Alphabets of Sand (2009). Hacker also translated Khoury-Ghata's first autobiographical novel, A House at the Edge of Tears (2004).

Khoury-Ghata has translated the verse of many Arab poets. Her translation of the

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<sup>5</sup> Roberto Sebastian Antonio Matta Echaurren (1911-2002) was a renowned Chilean-born Abstract Expressionist/Surrealist painter. Khoury-Ghata depicts her close relationship with "M" in La Maison aux orties.

celebrated Syrian-born poet Adonis' verse in Commencement du corps fin de l'océan appeared in 2004 and she is currently working with him on another translation of poetry. Moreover, as an advocate of young poets and critics, she has written reviews and essays, as well as prefaces for other authors. In addition to Matta, Khoury-Ghata has worked with the artists Diane de Bournazel who illustrated Six poèmes nomades (2005, an abridged version of verses in "Variations Autour d'un Cerisier"), and Velikovic who illustrated Version des oiseaux (2001). Khoury-Ghata remains a resident of Paris and travels frequently in France and abroad to promote literature.



## Chapter 1

### Expressing Identity in Contemporary Poetry

“L’identité contemporaine effectivement se tisse à une autre (...) Le sujet d’aujourd’hui est peut-être ainsi plus celui du dialogue que celui de la scission, de la rencontre que de la rupture,” attests Dominique Viart in his discussion of identity and otherness in French and Francophone poetry.<sup>6</sup> My dissertation proposes that Vénus Khoury-Ghata’s poetry reflects the dynamics of her bilingual and bicultural Arab-French identity by promoting encounter, and even synthesis, rather than confrontation, which is not, however, entirely avoided. Seeking to reconcile the distance and passage of time that separate the poet from her origins, as well as linguistic and cultural differences that divide self and society, Khoury-Ghata’s approach evokes the modern poet’s quest for a “rapprochement,” however, ephemeral, with the Other.

Lauded as the “Orphée au féminin” by the eminent French scholar Pierre Brunel, Khoury-Ghata’s verse weaves fragments of autobiography, History, and myth into an imaginary and tragic universe marked by irreparable loss conceived as both personal and collective. Referring to the death of family members as well as the dead of Lebanon’s wars, Khoury-Ghata considers poetry as “un lieu de compensation.”<sup>7</sup> She explains, “We

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<sup>6</sup> Dominique Viart, “l’un et l’autre,” *La Revue des Lettres Modernes*, *Écritures contemporaines de langue française* 4. (2001): 6.

<sup>7</sup> Extract from an interview that I conducted with Khoury-Ghata in Paris on 31 March 2009.

are the sum of all our sufferings."<sup>8</sup> The poet and the human, often maternal, figure at the center of her poetic universe share the same tasks, which are to mediate contrary forces and rehabilitate death with the aim of mending family and community bonds fractured by conflict and war.

In the framework of contemporary French poetry, Khoury-Ghata's poetic posture arguably corresponds to what critic and poet Jean-Claude Pinson suggests is the late twentieth-century French poet's response to the legacy of the "soleil noir de la mélancolie" and his effort to render poetry "vraiment habitante."<sup>9</sup> This calls for the establishment of a "nouvelle alliance avec le monde" so that the poem becomes "le lieu d'un dire du monde" (53). Pinson is alluding to the poet's aspiration to create a more authentic connection between living and writing that promotes communication with the Other, instead of writing as a logo-centric misanthrope confined to a universe of language.

In addition, Pinson observes a shift in contemporary French poetry from a strategy of "dépersonnalisation," which has heretofore dominated modern poetry, to a renewal with the tradition of "la poésie personnelle" in which autobiography plays a considerable role (53). He qualifies this "retour de la poésie personnelle" as being far removed from the Romantic rhetoric of "moi;" rather, it is capable of accommodating a diversity of expressions and tones, from anecdote to caricature, from the grave to the

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<sup>8</sup> Martina Sabra, "Interview with Vénus Khoury-Ghata," [www.qantara.de/webcom](http://www.qantara.de/webcom). Consulted on 3/15/09.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Claude Pinson, *Habiter en poète* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 1995). Pinson is an advocate of "néo-lyrisme," a contemporary movement represented by French poets who propose to rehabilitate the lyrical eschewed by partisans of a textual approach, emblemized by Denis Roche's declaration, "La poésie est inadmissible," evoked by *Tel Quel* in 1967.

comic. Harkening back to the poetry of the thirteenth-century French poet Rutebeuf as a model of the genre, he emphasizes, “Ce n’est pas l’intimité subjective du poète qui est dévoilée; c’est sa personne qui est théâtralisée” (238-239). While the personalization of poetry, supported by a movement toward “la réalité contingente,” risks reducing poetry to “reportage” of the trivial, Pinson reminds us of Goethe’s reflection that “c’est en saisissant le particulier que le poète peut espérer atteindre l’universel” (96).

Khoury-Ghata’s strategy also evokes Françoise Lionnet’s Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self Portraiture (1989) which discusses contemporary women writers’ practices of “re-appropriating the past” and recovering “submerged or repressed values” (4-5).<sup>10</sup> Lionnet’s emphasis on autobiographical representation of diversity, the rhetoric of ventriloquism and staged performance, palpable reality, and the displacement between the particular and universal, is not entirely different from particular components of “poésie personnelle” developed by Pinson. However, questions of race and gender that are critical to Lionnet’s discussion do not figure in Pinson’s assessment. Nonetheless, the representation of gender will prove to play a significant role in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry.

My examination of Khoury-Ghata’s poetry, especially her verse from the 1990s on, unequivocally reveals an autobiographical vein that reflects a range of expression encompassing anecdote and caricature, as well as the comic and the tragic, sometimes marked by irony, other times exhibiting genuine sorrow. Contrary to what Pinson

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<sup>10</sup> Françoise Lionnet, Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self Portraiture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). Lionnet examines the “autobiographical fictions” of African-American and Caribbean writers. Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, and Maryse Condé.

implies regarding the contemporary poet's evasion of subjective intimacy, Khoury-Ghata's verses will be shown to convey both the poet's subjective intimacy and the staging of dramatic personae, which reflects her consistent practice of merging contrary systems. Pinson acknowledges that the movement toward "la réalité contingente" brings into question the effect described by Northrop Frye as a displacement of gravity "du haut vers le bas, de l'idéal vers le réel, du noble vers le grotesque, du merveilleux vers le trivial" (97). I will interpret Khoury-Ghata's verse as representing negative and subversive movements that suggest an inversion of Frye's notion. In this regard, my study will demonstrate how her poetry represents the force of "renversement" that evokes a movement from the low to the high, from the real to the ideal, from the grotesque to the noble, and from the trivial to the marvelous. By resorting to a negative rhetoric of inversion, Khoury-Ghata promotes the role of the familiar, the humble, and the abject. Consequently, in her verse, the common narrative inclines toward the fabulous, the ordinary housewife manifests supernatural powers, and the abject is sanctified.

We will observe that this paradigm of inversion is supported in Khoury-Ghata's poetry by surrealist and magical realist strategies, as well as the consistent evocation of binary structures intrinsic to language and myth that privilege notions of the negative as well as the nocturnal. In addition, our examination of the dynamic interaction of personalization and mythicization as well as other binary structures represented by two languages, two cultures, two genres, and other oppositions, will demonstrate how Khoury-Ghata's mythico-poetic approach relies on the representation of the maternal as the mediating agent and nexus of a poetics that aspires to acknowledge and reconcile

differences, to join and fuse with the Other. This represents one writer's strategy of resolving conflict in a society challenged by the omnipresent threat of violence and the potential polarization of diverse languages and cultures.

### Surrealism, Magical Realism, and Myth

Having noted the significance of “la réalité contingente” in the context of Pinson's discussion of contemporary French poetry, my examination must nonetheless qualify Khoury Ghata's poetry as an expression of surrealism and magical realism.

Ses rêves lui font croire qu'elle est éveillée  
 un ange boiteux balaie sa cuisine  
 un troupeau de buffles est lâché dans sa lampe  
 ...  
 Le rêve dit-elle est lieu de sépulture et de séparation

Elle rêve comme elle écrit  
 par hachures parallèles qui se rencontrent hors de la page

Dessine-moi un rêve dit-elle à sa main (“Elle dit, Elle dit 21)

As the aforementioned verses suggest, Khoury-Ghata's poetry embraces surrealist impulses, the most important ones being underscored by Etienne-Alain Hubert's essay on surrealism in Dictionnaire de poésie de Baudelaire à nos jours: the "rapprochement" of “deux réalités,” conceived by Reverdy and discussed by Breton, the “stupéfiante image” devised by Aragon, the “vitesse” and the “vitalité retrouvée des mots,” the “trajectoire du

rêve,” and “la révolte.”<sup>11</sup>

Suggesting the surrealist notion of “la femme” as a “pourvoyeuse” of enigmas, Khoury-Ghata describes herself as a medium: “J’écris comme les voyantes. Il y a un côté visionnaire dans l’écriture. Les poètes sont souvent médiums”.<sup>12</sup> Her poetry and novels often portray communication between the living and the dead. The following verses depict the widow’s conjuring her dead husband out of the palm of her hand:

Le dixième jour  
il sortit de sa paume  
s’assit sur son ongle  
réclama à boire ses mots coutumiers et l’odeur d’amande de son genoux  
(“Monologue du mort, Anthologie personnelle 119)

Khoury-Ghata's poetic pursuit of mediating between the living and the dead evokes André Breton’s expression in his Second Manifeste of “un certain point de l’esprit d’où la vie et la mort, le réel et l’imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l’incommunicable, le haut et le bas, cessent d’être perçus contradictoirement.”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Khoury-Ghata’s poetry challenges temporal and spatial borders as well as frontiers separating languages and genres. However, while the “la puissance éternelle de la femme” cherished by surrealist writers and artists resonates in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry, her verse focuses less on the female figure’s potential as an object of desire than as a

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<sup>11</sup> Etienne-Alain Hubert, “Surréalisme,” Dictionnaire de poésie de Baudelaire à nos jours, ed. Michel Jarrety (Paris: PUF. 2001) 802-803.

<sup>12</sup> Cécile Oumhani, “Vénus Khoury-Ghata,” 2005. [www.encres-vagabondes.com/rencontre.khoury](http://www.encres-vagabondes.com/rencontre.khoury), consulted 16/11/07.

<sup>13</sup> André Breton, Manifestes du surréalisme (Paris: Gallimard/Folio essais; Paris, 1985) 72-73.

domestic subject who signifies a feminine work ethic.

Ma mère s'abîmait dans le mouvement poussif de son balai  
luttant contre un sable qu'elle appelait désert  
("Basse enfance," Anthologie personnelle 12)

Furthermore, while surrealist writers are principally inspired by urban landscapes, Khoury-Ghata's fixation on the rural landscape and figure is more in keeping with the strategy of magical realism. She expresses deep admiration for Latin American writers, especially the Columbian novelist Garcia Gabriel Marquez: "J'aime cette notion de folie et du surréalisme qu'utilisent les Sud-américains, que refusent les Français. Ils [les Français] sont très cartésiens, très raisonnables."<sup>14</sup>

While magical realism is usually affiliated with novels, Khoury-Ghata's poetry shows an affinity with the genre, defined by Charles Scheel as representing a "fusion des codes antinomiques," so that "les éléments réalistes (de la nature, en particulier) sont décrits d'une manière plus poétique qui souligne leur aspect intrinsèquement mystérieux."<sup>15</sup> Khoury-Ghata's poetic approach bears a striking resemblance to the magical realist narrative strategies enumerated by Wendy Faris in her essay "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction" in Magical Realism: the absence of hierarchy between the real and the fantastic, the resuscitation of myth, insistence on the link with nature, an emphasis on remystification, the use of

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<sup>14</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Scheel, Réalisme magique et réalisme merveilleux des théories aux poétiques (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005) 118. Scheel discusses the establishment of magical realism as an American, and principally Latin American, literary response in opposition to what was perceived as surrealists' fixation on the European metropolis and disdain for the novel.

metamorphosis as a common event, the promotion of ancient systems of belief and local lore in a local setting, and the advocacy of community.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Faris' identification of a feminine dimension of magical realism that accentuates the maternal and domestic spheres of influence will provide a compelling interpretation of Khoury-Ghata's verse.<sup>17</sup> Her poetry represents numerous domestic scenes, like the following which portrays mothers' cooking in anticipation of dead children sitting down to eat, after which mysterious hands will do the dishes, turn out the lights, and shut the door.

L'épicéa prépare un mélange de six herbes  
 pour les mères qui touillent le potage en cercles clos  
 les enfants morts n'ont qu'à se mettre à table  
 les mains transies feront la vaisselle  
 éteindront les lumières  
 puis claqueront la porte derrière eux dans un froissement d'ailes  
 ("Variations autour d'un cerisier," Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 126)

Faris' reference to the magical realist strategy of resuscitating myth invites an assessment of myth represented by surrealists. In Le récit poétique, Tadié underscores the role of myth in Aragon's Le Paysan de Paris, which "faire naître des mythes nouveaux, en confrontant des personnages marginaux de la vie moderne avec des mythes anciens."<sup>18</sup> In addition, Breton's Nadja "est une créature mythique parce qu'elle se situe à l'origine du monde et d'une nouvelle gènesè." He adds that Breton adopts "le point de vue des véritables mythographes qui fait valoir que la condition même de viabilité d'un

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<sup>16</sup> Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris, ed. Magical Realism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 163-190.

<sup>17</sup> Wendy Faris, "Women and Women and Women," Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of the Narrative (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004) 170-219.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Yves Tadié, Le récit poétique (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1978).



mythe est de satisfaire à la fois à plusieurs sens, parmi lesquels on a voulu distinguer le sens poétique, le sens historique, le sens urano graphique et le sens cosmologique” (155). As for general notions of myth, Tadié compares the “linéarité du récit” with the “circularité du mythe” (157). Regarding the distinction between the realist novel and the “récit mythique,” he argues that the former serves to “dénoter” or “connoter” a world while the latter aims to “susciter” a world (158). Lastly, he suggests that myth encompasses “en même temps la mort et la fécondité, le drame et l’initiation” (161). Tadié’s observations of surrealists’ representations of myth – the encounter of new and ancient myths, the link between the mythical female figure and genesis – as well as his general notions of myth’s circular structure and its generative function will resonate in our examination of Khoury-Ghata’s verse.

My dissertation will acknowledge the vast imaginary resources that surrealist and magical realist notions bring to bear in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry, especially with regard to her portrait of the mediating feminine figure; however, my study will principally focus on identifying structures of myth and language that support her poetic determination and permeation of frontiers establishing two poetic traditions (Francophone and Arabophone), two languages (French and Arabic), two genres (poetry and novel), two modes (narrative and lyrical), two genders (female and male), and two voices (personal and collective). These underlying binary structures will contribute to the organization of my dissertation.

### French and Arab Poetic Traditions

Like many Francophone authors, whose writing is influenced by the French

Hexagon as well as their origins outside of it, Khoury Ghata's oeuvre represents a hybrid text, in which multicultural and transnational dimensions reflect global trends in contemporary literature. Taking into account the hybridity of her verse, which manifests the heritage of surrealist poetry and the sensibilities of the magical realist novel, Chapter 2 will focus on the complementarity of French and Arab traditions that have shaped Khoury-Ghata's arabofrancophonic approach to writing. The impact of France's history and enduring influence in Lebanon cannot be understated.<sup>19</sup> France's relationship with Lebanon and its support of the minority Maronite population began centuries ago and culminated in the French Mandate from 1920 to 1943. Although the Christian community has since been weakened by emigration among other factors, Lebanon continues to maintain a privileged relationship with France. France's unique and enduring role of nurturing Lebanese writers will be reflected in references to Khoury-Ghata's predecessors and compatriots who continue to write in French and publish in France.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, my examination will reveal in Khoury-Ghata's verse echoes of Georges Schehadé's poetry, as well as the legacy of Maronite tradition, which will be evoked in references to Biblical figures and events, as well as religious rituals.

Critics have noted, and Khoury-Ghata has confirmed, the influence of particular French poets on her work, beginning with the late nineteenth-century poets Rimbaud and Baudelaire, then the twentieth-century surrealist poets such as Char and Aragon, as well

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<sup>19</sup> Thirty eight per cent of the Lebanese population claim to be Francophone to some degree according to Rana Moussaoui, "Le Liban, bastion francophone pris d'assaut par l'anglais," Agence France Presse, March 9, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Zahida Darwiche Jabbour's Littératures francophones du Moyen-Orient (Aix-en-Provence: Edusud. 2007) 85-178, provides a contemporary overview of Lebanese poets, novelists, and playwrights.

as Saint-John Perse. On the other hand, Khoury-Ghata eschews contemporary French poets, whom she describes as “les adeptes d'amaigrissement.” Stating a preference for the French novelist, Khoury-Ghata attributes her representation of oral expression to Celine who gave her “le sens du langage dans la rue.”<sup>21</sup>

War in Lebanon had an enormous impact on Khoury-Ghata’s emergence as a writer. My study will show how the themes and structure of her oeuvre are marked by violence, both implicit and explicit. During the 1970s, Lebanese women novelists and poets, both Francophones and Arabophones, gained momentum as a literary force. As Mariam Cooke points out, war provided women writers with the will and the opportunity to express their outrage and frustration as well as seek a resolution to the conflict.<sup>22</sup> Their response, which includes that of Khoury-Ghata, constituted a sharp critique against what they perceived as an oppressive patriarchal system whose male-perpetuated violence was engaged in a collective suicide. Although Khoury-Ghata had already moved to France when the civil war broke out, she responded in writing, “sans risques, sans confession, sans danger. La langue arabe appartenait à ceux dont je partageais les terreurs par l’image seulement. L’arabe appartenait à ceux qui en mouraient.”<sup>23</sup> We will observe throughout my study the omnipresence of death in both a personal and collective context.

With regard to Khoury-Ghata’s Arab heritage, my examination will draw on

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<sup>21</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>22</sup> Mariam Cooke, *War's Other Voices, Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Vénus Khoury-Ghata, "Pourquoi j'écris en français," *Women in French Studies*. 9/1 (2001): 18-21.

Salma Khadra Jayyusi's introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry to trace its evolution, particularly in Lebanon, and its contribution to Khoury-Ghata's formation as a writer.<sup>24</sup> Khoury-Ghata insists on the Arab origins of her poetry : "j'ai ma propre poésie qui vient d'ailleurs, un mélange d'arabe, de la poésie arabe (...)" (18).<sup>25</sup> The poet often attributes her interest in writing to the literary pioneer Gibran Khalil Gibran. They share the same mountain origins where she grew up reading his prose. We will also take into account how mid-century Arab poets integrated mythical themes of death and revival into their own verse, while experimenting with Arab poetic forms and themes. Reviewing Khoury-Ghata's contact over the course of her career with eminent Lebanese poets, including Saïd 'Aql, Ounsi al-Hage, and the Syrian poet Adonis, this examination will underscore her affiliation and collaboration with innovators of Arabic poetry.

### Myth and the Maternal

As the preceding verses suggest, the maternal figure and the mother tongue are fundamental components of the content and structure of Khoury-Ghata's verse. The maternal figure, often inspired by Khoury-Ghata's mother, represents the principal protagonist of many verses, such as those in "Basse enfance," "Elle dit," and "Orties." In the sequence "Les mots," which represents the alphabet of the poet's maternal language, Arabic, the evocation of the maternal figure is doubled, signified by two nearly identical letters: "'Dad' est ma mère dit la terre / 'Sad' ma marâtre." Their calligraphic signs in

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<sup>24</sup> Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Modern Arab Poetry (New York: Columbia University, 1987).

<sup>25</sup> Personal interview.

Arabic echo this similitude ( ص , ض ). Not only does Khoury-Ghata's poetry accord a privileged position to the maternal figure, it also focuses attention on maternal gestures. For instance, in "Orties," the mother figure is portrayed in one sole verse as dreaming in a static position before an urban landscape, then in subsequent verses as a hyperactive force in "nature sauvage":

Immobile face à la ville  
la mère bougeait dans ses seuls rêves  
enjambait des ruisseaux  
piétinait des ronces  
houspillait des chacals  
lançait des pierres sur les serpents (Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 25)

Maternal language is also represented by the articulation of the mother who addresses nature and man, the living and the dead. The title "Elle dit" evokes her role as a guardian of oral tradition. She usually expresses a kind of rustic wisdom in a euphemistic manner: "Elle dit / les migrants ne remplaceront pas la route / et ce ne sont pas les miettes de pain qui vont dérouter les hirondelles" (Elle dit 29).

Chapter 3 will propose theories whose binary structures represent two axes of my dissertation, myth and the maternal. Contemporary French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, whose La Révolution du langage poétique (1974)<sup>26</sup> identifies poetic language as a privileged expression of subversion generated by the maternal, will provide one framework for my analysis of Khoury-Ghata's poetry. My dissertation will draw on some of Kristeva's major concepts developed in Soleil noir:

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<sup>26</sup> Julia Kristeva, La Révolution du langage poétique (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1974).

dépression et mélancolie (1987), Les Nouvelles maladies de l'âme (1993), Histoires d'amour (1983) and Pouvoirs de l'horreur (1980)<sup>27</sup>, published roughly during the same era when Khoury-Ghata was establishing her career as a writer. Extracts of these works collectively identify the maternal in the representation of language signification, the sacred, temporality, melancholia, and the abject.

This chapter will discuss Kristeva's theories in support of my construction of Khoury-Ghata's portrayal of the maternal as a negative and subversive force. I will focus particularly on how Kristeva's semiotic modality, expressing pre-oedipal drives, can be used to analyze Khoury-Ghata's poetic structure and themes. Kristeva's association of feminine subjectivity with cycles and circular movement will also be underscored. In opposition, Kristeva's symbolic modality will be used to reveal Khoury-Ghata's representation of the paternal, linearity, and written expression. Finally, Khoury-Ghata's representation of the maternal figure will be revealed as a potential model of Kristeva's notion of "hérétique" defined by "mother" love, which serves to rehabilitate self and other. The following verses, which depict a maternal response to war, represent this ethical practice:

Les mères excédées arrêtaient les hostilités  
l'odeur du riz à la cannelle signait les armistices  
("12 juillet 2006," Les Obscurcis 26)

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<sup>27</sup> Julia Kristeva, Soleil noir: dépression et mélancolie (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), Les Nouvelles maladies de l'âme (Paris: Libraire Arthème Fayard, 1993), Histoires d'amour (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1983), and Pouvoirs de l'horreur (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980).

Having discussed Kristeva's concept of language signification based on the dichotomy of symbolic and semiotic modalities, my examination will turn to the proposition of French anthropologist and sociologist Gilbert Durand, whose Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire (1960) envisions a dichotomous classification of images according to two "régimes."<sup>28</sup> The attachment of Durand, a critic of myth, to binary systems is underscored by his definition of myth as a hybrid notion "tenant à la fois du discours et à la fois du symbole. Il est l'introduction de la linéarité du récit dans l'univers non linéaire et pluridimensionnel du sémantisme." (430).

Basing his study on myths from around the world, Durand organizes structures, archetypes, themes, and symbols into diurnal and nocturnal orders. Nocturnal images are further divided into two sets of structures, synthetic and mystical, the latter being closely identified with the maternal figure in the domestic sphere, and negative forces, including "renversement" and "descente." In addition, synthetic and mystical structures are respectively represented by archetypes, symbols, and themes affiliated with the actions of connection and merging. In contrast, the diurnal system in Durand's classification of images is affiliated with the sovereign male figure, the movement of ascent, as well as themes of separation and division.

Pierre Brunel's Dictionnaire des mythes féminins (2002) attests to the association of the maternal with the nocturnal, "Tout au long des siècles, la Nuit a été conçue comme

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<sup>28</sup> Gilbert Durand, Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire (Paris: Dunod. 1992).

une figure maternelle” (1453).<sup>29</sup> Khoury-Ghata identifies herself with the nocturnal: “La nuit pour moi, c’est un espace de la liberté. Dans la journée je suis astreinte, faire ceci, faire cela...La nuit m’appartient...Je suis libre de rêver...Je suis moi-même plus que le jour.”<sup>30</sup> Titles of her collections, Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits and Les Obscurcis, manifest her nocturnal disposition. This chapter will discuss the multiple ways in which Durand’s organization of the nocturnal expresses the maternal, principally in the context of mystical structures, whose symbols include the womb and the tomb, and whose rhetoric is supported by negative and euphemistic expressions. The correspondences that mark the notions of Durand and Kristeva with regard to the maternal will contribute to our discovery of the maternal figure as a negative, subversive, yet mediating force in Khoury-Ghata's verse.

The function of myth and its binary structure are the focus of Pierre Brunel's Mythocritique. théorie et parcours (2002), which accentuates myth's representation as “une structure bipolaire (...) c’est parce qu’il [le mythe] est tendu entre des forces antagonistes, entre des sens contradictoires qu’il peut être un ferment pour une littérature qui défie le temps” (71).<sup>31</sup> His Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires (1988)<sup>32</sup> and Dictionnaire des mythes féminins will provide definitions of mythical archetypes, symbols, and themes, essential to Khoury-Ghata's poetic representation. The definition

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<sup>29</sup> Pierre Brunel, ed., Dictionnaire des mythes féminins (Monaco. Editions du Rocher, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Brunel, Mythocritique. théorie et parcours. (Paris: PUF. 1992).

<sup>32</sup> Pierre Brunel, ed., Dictionnaire des mythes littéraire (Paris: PUF. 1988).



of the mythico-poetic will be especially critical to my interpretation of Khoury-Ghata's poetic stance because it implies the rapprochement of contrary forces as well as the merger of personal and collective narratives. Two specialists of feminine myths, Véronique Gély and Sylvie Ballestra-Puesch, will contribute to my construction of the mythicized female figure in Khoury-Ghata's poetry.<sup>33</sup> Finally, critical essays in Questions de mythocritique (2005)<sup>34</sup> will propose diverse mythical narratives and forms that my study will identify as framing Khoury-Ghata's verse in the context of cosmogonic myth, the myth of Otherness, the "conte," biomythography, archetype, and memoir.

#### Franco-Arab Encounters in the Context of Language

The poet's accommodation of two languages, French and Arabic, evokes the dynamics of an encounter marked by fusion on the one hand and conflict on the other.

J'ai raconté mon enfance en prose et en poésie dans un français métissé d'arabe, la langue arabe insufflant sa respiration, ses couleurs à la langue française si austère à mon goût. Je devais écarter ses cloisons étroites pour y insérer ma phrase arabe galopante, ample, baroque. Avec le recul, je pense que la langue française m'a servi de garde-fou contre les dérapages. J'ai fini par me trouver à l'aise dans son espace. Mais je continue à entendre un bruit de fers qui s'entrechoquent comme pour un duel dès que je prends la plume. Deux langues s'affrontent sur ma page et dans ma tête".<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> We will focus on Gély's definitions of myth and "mythopoétique," as well as Ballestra-Puech's essays on the mythical feminine figures of "Les Parques" and "Arachné."

<sup>34</sup> Danièle Chauvin, André Siganos, and Philippe Walter, ed., Questions de mythocritique (Paris: Editions Imago, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Bernard Mazon, "Entretien avec Vénus Khoury-Ghata," Autre sud, ed. Jean-Max Tixier, No. 19 (2002): 27.

Chapter 4 establishes Khoury-Ghata's representation of language as a binary system whose distinctive components suggest the possibility of a problematic encounter. Limiting their differences to the most basic characteristics of writing systems, French is represented by a romanized system of letters and is written from left to right, while Arabic is represented by a calligraphic system of letters and is written from right to left. Consequently, merging her maternal language, Arabic, into the French text risks what Moroccan writer Abdelkebir al-Khatibi expresses as being on the "threshold of the untranslatable."<sup>36</sup> The poet confirms, "Si je pouvais écrire le français de droite à gauche comme on écrit en arabe je le ferais mais on ne me permet pas. Personne ne me lirait."<sup>37</sup>

Khoury-Ghata's determination to insert Arabic into her French poetry and novels will be shown to evoke what Ashcroft's The Empire Writes Back (1989) outlines as one strategy of post-colonialist writers who use the language of their origins to signify difference.<sup>38</sup> Verses in "Les mots" will serve as a compelling example of how the fusion of languages functions in Khoury-Ghata's verse, which represents the personification of romanized Arabic letters.

"Aleph" baguette de sourcier  
va-nu-pieds traduit en sept langues  
...  
"Ra" appelle à son secours les anges qui traversent l'évangile à pied

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<sup>36</sup> Abdelkebir al-Khatibi, Love in Two Languages, Trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) 4-5.

<sup>37</sup> Personal interview.

<sup>38</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, The Empire Writes Back (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

(Compassion des pierres 11, 20)

My analysis of “Les mots” will establish that by assuming a mythico-poetic stance, the poet’s blending of French and “romanized” Arabic letters of the alphabet constructs a cosmogonic mythical narrative that pays homage to the origins of language as well as her Lebanese identity.

Khoury-Ghata sometimes laments not being able to find a French equivalent for an Arab word. “Quand je dis ‘shajara’ pour arbre, ‘shajara’ est beaucoup plus feuillu, il a plus de branches qu’arbre sec.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike Arabic letters, she rarely uses Arabic words in her poetry; however, she occasionally inserts them into her prose in novels, like she does in Sept pierres pour la femme adultère. Although my dissertation focuses on poetry, this novel’s representation of the maternal language is included in my study because it provides a sharp contrast to the portrait of the Arabic language in her poetry. My analysis will demonstrate how this novel’s representation of Arabic words and expressions highlights the novelist’s self-awareness of being an interpreter of the Other represented in this context as the Middle Eastern Muslim. My analysis of the representation of Arabic words and expressions in the French narrative will reveal how Khoury-Ghata’s novel risks what Ashcroft describes as “creating the reality of the Other in the guise of describing it” (57) by suggesting an unbridgeable gap between two cultures, further characterized as a power struggle between genders, East and West, the traditional and the modern, and the religious and secular.

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<sup>39</sup> Personal interview.

### The Narrative in Poetry

Khoury-Ghata explains how her poetry and novels are intertwined: “Je raconte des histoires dans mes poèmes et écris de la poésie dans mes romans (Mazo 28). She seems to prefer the distinction of being a poet, but she insists on her status as a novelist as well: “Je viens d’une terre qui produit des cailloux et des poètes. Je suis donc d’abord poète. Mais écrivaine aussi.”<sup>40</sup> Evoking the liberty and rapidity of writing poetry,

Khoury-Ghata explains the difference between the two genres:

Le roman n’est que la forme avortée de la poésie. Tout est permis, dans le poème: un arbre s’envole, un ange déchoit, les mots mûrissent sur la branches des phrases, tombent par grappes, on en fait des confitures de sens. Ce qui distingue la poésie du roman, c’est sa rapidité et sa fulgurance, alors que le roman marche au pas normal des êtres humains. Dans le poème, je suis dans une sorte d’hallucination.” (97)<sup>41</sup>

While Khoury-Ghata exclaims, “Je viens du monde arabe où la poésie doit être lyrique,” (Stout 312), her verse is emphatically marked by a narrative dimension. “La poésie est un lieu pour raconter,” she insists. When asked how to define the structure of her poetry, she recalls the notion of “transporting” the prose of her novels into the verse of her poetry, and vice versa. One could argue that her structure has something in common with particular works of modern poets, like Ponge’s La Rage de l’expression or Jaccottet’s Paysages avec figures absentes, both of whose poetic prose is occasionally

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<sup>40</sup> Latifa Abousaid, “Vénus Khoury-Ghata,” Femmes du Maroc, 01/07/08, [www.femmesdumaroc.com](http://www.femmesdumaroc.com), consulted 2/9/09.

<sup>41</sup> Fawzia Zouari, “Vénus Khoury-Ghata,” La Revue Pour l’intelligence du monde (Mars/Avril 2008): 97-99.

interrupted by sequences of lyrical verse. What distinguishes Khoury-Ghata's poetry, however, is that whether she employs a narrative or lyrical voice, her poetry is consistently represented by the structure of verse, characterized by an irregular rhythm, an absence of rhyme, and a parsimonious use of punctuation.

Each verse usually constitutes part of a long phrase whose beginning and termination coincide, respectively, with the first and last verse of a stanza. One or two words may stand alone, and a single verse may stand alone, but more often than not, stanzas may include anywhere from two to a dozen verses or more, and there are spaces between stanzas. Verses are marked by "enjambement," anaphors, repetition, alliteration, and assonance. The accumulation of verbs, nouns, and subordinate phrases, in a single verse or a sequence of verse, reinforced by the absence of punctuation, produces the effect of a rapid flow of images and sounds, only slightly interrupted by the pause prompted by the end of each verse and each stanza. Usually, each page of poetry represents a complete poem. In as much as the frontiers between poetry and novels, like those between fact and fiction, remain open in Khoury-Ghata's poetic universe, it is not unusual to find the recurrence of an expression, a verse, or a sequence of verses in more than one poem, collection, or even in her novels.

Chapter 5 examines Khoury-Ghata's representation of two mythical narratives in verse. Establishing that narrativity in French poetry represents a long tradition, this chapter studies how verses in "Orties" (Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits) and the novels Une Maison au bord des larmes and La Maison aux orties construct what Marilyn Hacker evokes as a "mythos of the self." Khoury-Ghata's "bricolage"-like self-portrait will also

be discussed in the context of Michel Beaujour's notion of a self-portrait that is based on anecdotes and on a-chronological narrative. "Orties" will also serve as a model of the poet's self-projection as a medium, whose conjuring of the dead resuscitates the mother-daughter bond. In addition, my analysis will demonstrate how the poet's authoritative "I," narrating family travails of domestic violence and instability, merges into the collective "we," expressing a more universal story of war and migration.

The second part of this chapter will study mythical narrative in the context of a "conte en vers," in which fusion is represented by the merger of folktale and fable. I will show how the poem "Variations autour d'un cerisier" adopts the traditional structure of the "conte" to dramatize the cyclical experience of loss and the quest for recovery. Furthermore, the narrative will be shown to evoke elements of the historical phenomenon of Lebanese immigration to America, while striving for a universal interpretation of the signification of loss. The dichotomy of loss and recovery will be shown as reinforced by other binary structures represented by question and response, oral and written expression, Oriental and Occidental, and life and death. The representations in this chapter of both autobiography and "conte" will highlight the mediating role of the maternal figure whose voice, gestures, and cyclic interrogation of absence and death echo the theme of rehabilitating loss on personal and collective levels.

#### Mediating Figures: Fantastic Heroines and Fallen Heroes

Khoury-Ghata affirms giving voice to what she identifies as "des surfemmes." She further defines her interpretation of gender in asserting, "Ils sont fragiles les hommes."

C'est nous (les femmes) maintenant qui sommes devenues les surhommes. C'est nous qui les protégeons."<sup>42</sup> Critics have devoted much attention to the pronounced themes of nature and landscape in contemporary French poetry; however, in Khoury-Ghata's poetic universe it is the human figure that inspires the drama that unfolds. Taking into account the dynamics of figuration noted by Dominique Viart in his discussion of contemporary Francophone poetry (6), as well as notions of the strange and scandalous underscored by Véronique Gély in her study of mythology and gender, Chapter 6 will focus on Khoury-Ghata's representation of the female figure, which inspires my dissertation's overarching theme of myth and the maternal voice. It will also examine the dichotomy represented by the relationship between female and male figures, whose portraits as fantastic heroines and fallen heroes remain juxtaposed.

Drawing on verses from Khoury-Ghata's entire oeuvre, this chapter will begin by concentrating on the representation of the female body, and its sexual and reproductive functions, then examine female gestures, represented in the domestic domain, followed by the female voice, whose representation is critical to the poet's vindication of the status of the maternal voice. Khoury-Ghata's verse will be revealed as promoting a maternal archetype whose mastery of forces in the domestic sphere are evocative of the "Grande Déesse" identified as the principal agent in Durand's nocturnal order as well as the protagonist in Faris' magical realist conception of the feminine. However, my analysis will also show to what extent the application of their notions falls short.

In addition, my examination will show how the female figure's mediation of

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<sup>42</sup> Personal interview.

boundaries separating life from death signifies the dismantlement of another bipolar system. In this regard, I propose that Khoury-Ghata's portraits of the mother and the widow evoke the myths of Demeter's seeking Persephone and Orphée's quest for Eurydice, both of which serve as compelling expressions of the nocturnal rhetoric of inversion in Khoury-Ghata's poetry. Her portraits also suggest myths associated more specifically with the Eastern Mediterranean: Isis and Osiris, and Ishtar and Tammuz. In addition, given that the portraits of mother and widow are based on the poet's personal experiences with death, they will serve as models of the interaction of personalization and mythicization.

In contrast, the representation of the male figure in the framework of the nocturnal order will show that it is assigned a negative and diminished role: "Il ne sait plus gérer sa trace / ni faire crier son ombre entre ses mains" ("Fables pour un peuple d'argile," Mon Anthologie 188). Assuming the role of the foil to the "Grande Déesse," the male figure, which Durand describes as "un ange déchu," will be shown to function as a symbol of initiation, sacrifice, and resurrection in a messianic drama. My examination will therefore reveal the male figure principally as a fallen hero, or as the "abject" figure of the deceased, whose body remains vaguely defined and whose protests are muted. The male figure will also be defined by his vocation and his gestures, whether in its function as an archetype in a primordial landscape, or as the humble artisan in a more banal context. The most flattering portrait of the male figure will prove to be that of the instructor whose knowledge of the maternal language reinforces the maternal bond.



Reconciling Collective Tensions

Seules leurs voix traversent les obstacles  
 Sans faire le tri entre ardoise et armoise  
 Sourdes à la multiplication des cloisons  
 À la division du sol par l'odeur du blé  
 ("Elle dit," Les Obscurcis 120)

This study will allude many times to the significance of collective identity in Khoury-Ghata's poetry. Danièle Chauvin's essay "Mémoire et mythe" proposes a dichotomous construction that interrogates the distinction between the former that implies "un rapport, personnel ou collectif, au passé, à l'Histoire" and the latter that guarantees "la cohérence et la pérennité" of the collective.<sup>43</sup> The common objective of memoir and myth, which Chauvin identifies as defying the ravages of time and death, invites more reflection on Khoury-Ghata's representation of the collective. Contemporary conflict and war in Lebanon, once touted as the "Switzerland of the Middle East," renders the notion of the collective problematic and controversial. Reviewing the mythico-poetic attitude as expressing a "rallying point" and a "meeting place" for the personal and the collective, Chapter 7 will reveal how Khoury-Ghata negotiates the contours of boundaries defined by the dichotomy of memoir and myth to express two different visions of the collective.

The first section will propose to underscore the poet's recourse to memoir by examining verses in "Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse" (Elle dit), whose satiric representation of Lebanese village life pays homage to Khoury-Ghata's maternal origins, while criticizing hypocritical behavior and social conventions that expose the

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<sup>43</sup> "Mémoire et mythe," Questions de mythocritique. 229-236.

community's fragile cohesion. The representation of the collective in a broader mythical context will be the focus of the second section, which will examine elegiac verses in Les Ombres et leurs cris, Monologue du mort, and Les Obscurcis that pay tribute to the dead, evoked as the poet's deceased family members or victims of Lebanon's wars. A comparison of the latter portraits of the collective dead will suggest both the consistency and transition that mark the poet's approach to death over the course of three decades. This chapter will demonstrate how Khoury-Ghata's distinctive visions of the collective promote the mediating role of women who reinforce collective values in comparison with men who are represented as perpetrators or victims of violence. Her portrayal of the collective as disfigured on the one hand, and reconfigured, on the other, will nonetheless reveal her attachment to the single notion of the collective as a community threatened in life as in death.

Having thus organized my dissertation under the rubric of six major themes: poetic heritage, theories of myth and the maternal, language, narrative in verse, female and male figures, and figures as a collective entity, my objective is to expose diverse facets of Khoury-Ghata's poetry; however, my dissertation will not represent an exhaustive study of her oeuvre. As I have indicated in this introduction, my examination will address most of her poetic works, as well as some of her novels. I will examine verses in collections representing the breadth of her poetic career, beginning with Les Visages inachevés, which she has disavowed, Terres stagnantes, Au sud du silence, Les Ombres et leurs cris, Fables d'un peuple d'argile, Qui parle au nom du jasmin, Un faux pas du soleil, Monologue du mort, Mon Anthologie, and accentuate those that appear in

Anthologie personnelle, Elle dit, Compassion des pierres, Alphabet de sable, Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits, and Les Obscurcis, because, in my view, these latter poetic works express the superior craft of a mature poet, who has been publishing prose and verse for several decades.

I also take into consideration some of her novels, especially Une Maison au bord des larmes and La Maison aux orties, both of which serve as rich supplements to the autobiographical dimension of her verse. Sept pierres pour la femme adultère and La Maestra propose an interesting juxtaposition with regard to Khoury-Ghata's insertion of non-Francophone languages in French prose; however I will focus on the former because it represents the writer's maternal language, whereas the latter portrays Spanish language and Latin American culture. I will also refer briefly to Privilège des morts, Le Moine, l'ottoman et la femme du grand argentier, and La Maîtresse du notable because my readings of those novels has contributed to my construction of the representation of mythical heroines and heroes in Khoury-Ghata's verse.

## Chapter 2

### French and Arab Poetry: The Heritage of Two Traditions

#### Introduction

The following chapter will examine the influence of both French and Arab poetic traditions, which represent a critical binary aspect of Khoury-Ghata's status as a bilingual and bicultural poet. First, we will examine how her poetic posture is shaped by her attachment to French poets and movements, particularly the late nineteenth-century pioneers of modern verse, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, as well as twentieth-century surrealists, such as Char and Aragon. A review of the status of French language and culture in Lebanon and the emergence of modern Francophone poets there will highlight the exemplary role of the poet Georges Schehadé. Then, we will take into account some developments in modern Arab poetry as well as Arabophone Lebanese poets, such as Gibran Khalil Gibran and Adonis, who have contributed to Khoury-Ghata's formation as a poet. The relationship of the poet with each language and culture reveals the rich complexities of a dual heritage.

Sources for this chapter include, but are not limited to published interviews with Khoury-Ghata, her essays "Pourquoi j'écris en Français" and "La Poésie arabe au Moyen-Orient,"<sup>44</sup> as well as her autobiographical novels Une Maison au bord des larmes and La Maison aux orties, Zahida Darwiche Jabbour's Littératures francophones du

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<sup>44</sup> The latter essay appears in Europe, No. 609-610, Janvier-Février (1980): 74-78.

Moyen-Orient, Georges Schehadé. Oeuvres complètes. La Poésie,<sup>45</sup> Michael Bishop's essay on Khoury-Ghata in Contemporary French Women Poets, Salma Khadra Jayyusi's introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry, and Nathalie Handal's introduction to The Poetry of Arab Women (1-62).

### The Heritage of French Poets and Movements

Khoury-Ghata rarely fails to mention in interviews the problematic approach of bilingual expression. Her essay “Pourquoi j’écris en Français” addresses the issue head-on.

Je suis bigame. Je mène une double vie sous le couvert de l’écriture. J’écrirai un jour un livre pour raconter ma vie au grand jour avec la langue française et ma vie clandestine avec la langue arabe. Je passe de la première, rigoureuse, scrupuleuse à la deuxième: ample, généreuse bondissante. Il m’arrive de les réunir dans un même moule, l’esprit de l’une dans la forme de l’autre, les couleurs de l’une avec les saveurs de l’autre. L’arabe infusant son miel et sa folie à la langue française, celle-ci servant de garde-fou contre l’exaltation et les dérapages. L’une et l’autre devenant une jusqu’à ne plus savoir à laquelle des deux appartient telle ou telle expression (18)

In the same essay, Khoury-Ghata does not propose the names of Arabophone writers who may have exercised an influence on her work; however, she enumerates in verse, no less, the names of six French writers and one exceptional Francophone writer, all of them men:

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<sup>45</sup> (Beyrouth: Editions Dar an-Nahar, 1998).

De Racine qui m'a appris à serrer la phrase jusqu'aux larmes  
 De Pascal qui m'a enseigné à douter du perceptible et de n'être sûr  
 que de l'imperceptible  
 De Rabelais le vorace  
 De Montesquieu, géographe de la pensée  
 Du sombre Baudelaire  
 De Georges Schéhadé l'enchanteur  
 De Céline à la fois grandiose et ignoble. (21)

Paying tribute to the diverse talents of writers representing the French canon from the Renaissance to the twentieth-century, Khoury-Ghata aims to convince the reader of her appreciation for the heritage of French poetry, perhaps with the audacious objective of projecting herself into their ranks. In a more personal and modest manner, Khoury-Ghata traces her vocation as a poet to the legacy of her brother Victor, an aspiring poet whose talent was wasted by drug addiction and his subsequent internment in an asylum. Her first autobiographical novel, Une Maison au bord des larmes, depicts her brother's enthusiasm for the nineteenth-century poets: Victor Hugo, whose alexandrine form he adopted, and most of all, Rimbaud, "[his] frère d'Enfer et d'Abyssinie" (26). His worship of Rimbaud, whose verse is a constant companion, even incites him to adopt the poet's name as a pseudonym while pounding on his lover's door, "Ouvre à Rimbaud!" (87). Khoury-Ghata claims that her early poems in Les Visages inachevés reveal the same influences:

je foulerai les cieux  
 à la recherche d'autres dieux  
 à la recherche d'autres faces  
 des faces inachevées  
 que je modèlerai de mes mains

à mon propre reflet  
 dans la boue, dans la terre glaise  
 et je serais mon propre Dieu (...)

Acknowledging the satisfaction of having published this first collection in 1966, Khoury-Ghata declares having nonetheless divested herself of these influences early in her career: “(...) ce sont des poèmes que j’ai reniés par la suite, parce qu’ils portaient par trop la marque d’influences de jeunesse (Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Supervielle).”<sup>46</sup> Despite her disavowal of this collection, which does not appear on her list of published works, the titles of certain poems in the collection evoke nocturnal and mystical themes developed in subsequent works: “Les voiles noires,” “Tarots et talismans,” “Perverse,” “Enterrer le soleil,” “Pendez-le à un rayon de lune,” “La terre est charnue.”

The American translator Marilyn Hacker's explanation of Khoury-Ghata's surrealist impulses alludes to the poet's declared aversion of what she considers to be the Cartesian disposition of French surrealist poets:

La poésie de Vénus Khoury-Ghata a un lien fort avec le surréalisme, mais il s’agit d’un surréalisme autre que celui d’André Breton: moins voulu, moins philosophiquement aléatoire, plus organique: une poursuite de l’image insolite au fil de poème au lieu d’une recherche des points de rupture. C’est un surréalisme qui souligne la complicité et la communication du sujet humain avec le reste du monde naturel (...).<sup>47</sup>

While Khoury-Ghata implies that Breton was too rational in his approach, she is

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<sup>46</sup> Olympia Alberti, “Les Alphabets de sable de Vénus Khoury-Ghata,” *Autre Sud*. Ed. Jean-Max Tixier, 19 (2002): 40.

<sup>47</sup> Marilyn Hacker, “Vénus Khoury-Ghata. L’arabe infusant son miel et sa folie dans la langue française.” *Aujourd’hui Poème* mars (2002).

effusive about Aragon, whose work she has translated and with whom she declares having had “des relations très sismiques.” Impressed by his political engagement, she compares his stature in the Arab world to that of his peers, “C’est le poète français le plus traduit dans le monde arabe, le plus lu, le plus connu. Il y a Aragon, après Victor Hugo, Char passe parmi les intellos, Eluard un peu, mais Aragon, c’est le poulx du peuple. Rares sont les poètes arabes qui ne se sont pas inspirés par lui.”<sup>48</sup> Besides Aragon, an early indication of her attachment to surrealism is her dedication to the poet René Char of verses in the collection of poems Les Ombres et leurs cris (1979).<sup>49</sup>

Parce qu’ils ont hésité entre la rose et l’ombre  
parce qu’ils ont chargé leurs fusils de pluie  
ils sont morts d’oubli

Khoury-Ghata’s frequent use of "rapprochement des contraires" reflects what Michel Jarrety proposes as Char’s “nostalgie de l’unité perdue entre les êtres et les règnes, entre les hommes aussi.”<sup>50</sup> In the documentary film Vénus Khoury-Ghata: Un Français aux saveurs de l’Orient the poet professes an affinity for the twentieth-century poets Saint-John Perse and Michaux, the former with regard to his expression of the exotic, and the latter with regard to his use of the exaggerated metaphor.<sup>51</sup> In interviews,

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<sup>48</sup> Victor Hache, “Le poulx du peuple. Vénus Khoury-Ghata.” 19 décembre 2002, [www.humanite.fr](http://www.humanite.fr), 2/21/2009.

<sup>49</sup> This text was left unpaginated.

<sup>50</sup> “René Char,” Michel Jarrety, ed., Dictionnaire de poésie de Baudelaire à nos jours. 130.

<sup>51</sup> Vénus Khoury-Ghata: Un Français aux saveurs de l’Orient, Diwali Productions and Blue Bird Productions, Thomas Verduyssen and Maxime Gervais, presented at the Sorbonne, 6 March 2008 during an exchange with Khoury-Ghata hosted by Pierre Brunel.



she admits to favoring the poetry of contemporary French poets Claude Esteban, Guy Goffette, André Velter, and Jean Orizet.<sup>52</sup> These stated preferences suggest a connection with poet-voyagers and explorers of the world beyond continental France. Verses in Les Obscurcis are devoted to Esteban, a Francophone poet of Spanish origin, who died in 2006. He, too, explored the terrain of bilingual/bicultural identity. On the contrary she keeps her distance from certain contemporary poets whom she describes as "les adeptes d'amaigrissement" and whose verses, she exclaims in dismay, represent neither stories, nor images, nor metaphors<sup>53</sup>

Given the diverse modes and expressions adopted by French poets in the late twentieth-century, Khoury-Ghata's work is arguably just as difficult to classify as that of many of her peers. Categorizing French poets according to gender does not simplify the issue of classification, as proven by Michael Bishop, whose second volume of Contemporary French Women Poets includes an essay on Vénus Khoury-Ghata (82-99). Focusing on her early poetic production, Bishop compares its marked feminine sensibility with that of other women writers like Hélène Cixous and Jeanne Hyvrard, who express a connection to "mère-terre" (86). He finds traces of Baudelaire's "paradox," and Rimbaud "visionariness," as well as the "dialectical propensity" inspired by Char (83-84, 87). He also discerns echoes of Saint-John Perse in her representation of "continuity" and lack of punctuation (88). Finally, in contrast with Marilyn Hacker, he finds evocations of

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<sup>52</sup> "Vénus Khoury-Ghata.interview," 12 October (no year cited), "L"internaute week-end. [www.linternaute.com](http://www.linternaute.com), consulted 15/11/2007.

<sup>53</sup> Personal interview.

Breton, specifically the metaphorical structure of his “L’Union libre,” in the emotive expression of Khoury-Ghata’s Qui parle au nom du jasmin (91). Verses addressed to her daughter Yasmine, whose name is evoked by the title, serve as an example:

Tu es mon point du jour  
 mon île bleue  
 ma clairière odorante

(...)

Tu es ma robe de caresses  
 mon foulard de tendresse  
 ma ceinture de baisers (Mon Anthologie 111)

One of the most striking manifestations of Khoury-Ghata’s association with surrealism is revealed by her relationship with the Chilean artist Roberto Antonio Sebastian Matta (1911-2002), who illustrated two limited edition collections of her poetry, Ils (Les Amis du musée d’art moderne, 1993) and Alphabet de sable (Editions Maeght, 2001). An innovative and engaged surrealist painter known for his three-dimensional representations of the psyche called inscapes, Matta had contact with some of the most celebrated artists and writers of his day, including Breton, Dali, Cioran, and Le Corbusier, and spent a lifetime painting in Europe and the Americas. Khoury-Ghata’s second autobiographical novel, La Maison aux orties, recounts her unanticipated widowhood and life-changing encounter with the older artist, whom she identifies as “M.” She implies that their subsequent relationship, however tumultuous, allowed them to serve as each other’s muse. She posed as his model; whereas he inspired verses for her

poetry: “Il disait – Le premier alphabet était de pierre. – Les consonnes portaient des vêtements rêches, les voyelles étaient nues, je répondais de mon côté” (42). Their collaboration led to Matta’s contribution of fanciful etchings and one lithograph of biomorphic figures to accompany Khoury-Ghata’s verse. Illustrations in Ils, a somber tribute to the dead, represent geometric forms in striking regal poses, while illustrations for Alphabet de sable, a whimsical homage to the Arabic alphabet in a miniature format, represents in vibrant colors couples making love.<sup>54</sup> Khoury-Ghata's devotion to Matta is also disclosed by her dedication to him of the long sequence of verse “Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse” in Elle dit.

In interviews and essays, Khoury-Ghata refers explicitly and almost exclusively to male poets; nonetheless, her interest in French women writers emerges in her dedication of verses to the editor and bookseller Régine Deforges, renowned for her scandalous publication of Aragon’s Le Con d’Irène and her advocacy of women writers and erotic literature. “Un Lieu d’eau sous la voûte” (Anthologie personnelle) confounds Eros and Thanatos: “Mort brève si fugace / halte à l’orage qui force la mer à boire son contenu d’eau”. In addition, Khoury-Ghata suggests her identification with women writers who challenge social conventions. In a collection of essays on women in the Mediterranean, her article “Roman de femmes autour de la Méditerranée” hails the perseverance of Georges Sand, Colette, and Simone Weil, as models of women writers

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<sup>54</sup> These impressive collections can be viewed in the rare book section of the Bibliothèque Nationale de la France.

who withstood opprobrium during their day (64).<sup>55</sup> A subsequent examination of Arab writers and poets demonstrates that Khoury-Ghata also expresses solidarity with Arab women writers, stigmatized for challenging social mores. For Khoury-Ghata, the poetics of scandal transcend language and culture.

### Francophone Poetic Tradition in Lebanon: the Exemplary Poet Georges Schehadé

Given that Khoury-Ghata did not move to France until her mid-thirties, it is clear that her vocation as a poet was first nurtured in Lebanon, whose identity as an Arab Mediterranean country with sizeable Christian and Muslim communities provides a particularly fertile domain for both Francophone and Arabophone poets. Due to Lebanon's location at the crossroads of Asian and European cultures, critics and scholars often describe Francophone Lebanese poets in the context of bridging the gap between the Orient and the Occident. Khoury-Ghata represents a long tradition of Francophone Lebanese poets, especially those hailing from Christian families. Since the eighteenth-century, France's influence in the region has engendered enduring ties with the Christian population, particularly the Maronites, a minority community plagued by a history of persecution. France's protection of the Maronites there contributed to the establishment of Lebanon as a separate state, independent of what was called Greater Syria.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> La Méditerranée des femmes, Ed. Nabil el Haggar (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998): 63-66.

<sup>56</sup> No official census has been conducted since 1932; however, it is estimated that Christians represent 30-40% of the population. For a brief history of France in Lebanon, see Dominique Chevallier's "Reflections on France, Lebanon, and the Syrian Area" in Franco-Arab Encounters, Ed. Carl Brown (Beirut: AUB Press, 1996) 179-197.

In addition, France's role in establishing schools, frequented mostly but not exclusively by Lebanese Maronites and other Christians, has produced multiple generations of educated Lebanese, who strongly identify with French language and culture. However, Arabic remains the official language of Lebanon, whose largely Arabophone Muslim population share the language, culture, and religion of Arabs in the region. The appropriation of French language and culture by Lebanese intellectuals has sometimes provoked tensions between Lebanese Christian and Muslim communities. Unlike their Algerian peers whose use of French is perceived as unavoidable because of France's colonial history there, the adoption of French expression by Lebanese writers is sometimes viewed as anti-Arab and unpatriotic. Consequently, Lebanese writers often feel compelled to justify their decision to write in French in the same manner that Khoury-Ghata expresses her relationship with two languages in her essay "Pourquoi j'écris en Français."

Lebanese scholar Zahida Darwiche Jabbour's study, Littératures francophones du Moyen-Orient, efficiently traces the evolution of Francophone poetry, the novel, and theater in Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt. Her chapter on Lebanese poetry explains that when Lebanon was still part of the Ottoman Empire, early twentieth-century Francophone Lebanese poets like Charles Corm and Elie Tyane used lyrical and neo-classical forms to channel nationalist aspirations that reflected their Phoenician (pre-Islamic) heritage. The poet Hector Khat's declaration represents this generation's devotion to France: "Mots français, mots du clair parler de douce France / Mots que je n'appris tard que pour vous aimer mieux". Darwiche Jabbour observes a transformation in the 1940s, when Fouad

Abi-Zeyd, inspired by Baudelaire and Rimbaud, and twentieth-century poets like Claudel and Valéry, adopted the new form of the prose poem and celebrated the diverse origins of Lebanese identity: “J’ai du sang latin dans mes veines – arabe aussi, Persan, grec, romain, assyrien, byzantin, j’ai tous les sangs” (99).

Khoury-Ghata, who represents a subsequent generation of Lebanese poets, underscores the names of two celebrated Lebanese writers who are renowned for initiating contact between Oriental and Occidental traditions. One is the acclaimed early twentieth-century writer and artist Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), who published in Arabic and English, and authored one of the best-selling books of all time, The Prophet. The other is Francophone poet and playwright Georges Schehadé (1905-1989), celebrated as a writer of “deux rives.” His name figures on the aforementioned list of writers appearing in Khoury-Ghata's essay, “Pourquoi j’écris en Français.” She applauds Schehadé’s amusing perspective with regard to being labeled a Francophone: “Francophone, somme gramophone ou dictaphone, aimait dire le ludique Georges Schehadé qui n’aimait pas ce terme. Il allait encore plus loin en déclarant que le mot francophone évoque pour lui un hors-la-loi, recherché par l’Interpol et ‘on photographie menotté entre deux gendarmes” (20). Schehadé’s own words about his decision to write in French are equally clever and charming: “Bien sûr, j’ai écrit en français toute ma vie. Pourquoi? Je ne sais pas. Je me rappelle mon émerveillement en entendant à l’école pour la première fois, le mot ‘azur’.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Danielle Baglione and Albert Dichy, Georges Schehadé, Poète de deux rives (Paris: Editions de L’IMEC, 1999) 284.

Launching his career as a poet in France in the 1930s, when surrealism was in vogue, Schehadé established contacts with the likes of Saint-John Perse, Max Jacob, and Jules Supervielle, and subsequently enchanted an elite circle of cosmopolitan writers and artists, including Pierre-Jean Jouve, Chagall, Julien Gracq, Octavio Paz, Michel Leiris, and Gaëton Picon. Saint-John Perse is among those who sing his praises: “Poète Schehadé. Poète qui l’est mieux? Poète jusqu’à se perdre lui-même dans le poème qui l’engendre.”<sup>58</sup> While Schehadé published a modest quantity of verse, admired by the contemporary poet Philippe Jaccottet and the critic Jean-Pierre Richard, his production as a playwright served as a successful extension of his poetic imagination. He was the first recipient of the Grand Prix de la Francophonie awarded by l’Académie Française in 1986.

Although Lebanon is never explicitly identified by name in his oeuvre, Schehadé vows his fidelity to his native country: “Mais je ne peux pas écrire ailleurs qu’au Liban. Autrefois, je ne venais à Paris que pour publier mes poèmes, pour faire jouer mes pièces. J’étais comme un paysan qui apporte à la ville ses oeufs et son lait. Le Liban...C’était à la fois l’Occident et tout le moelleux de l’Orient” (Baglione 284). Joseph Issa’s postface of the poet’s Oeuvres complètes affirms the presence; however illusive, of Lebanon in Schehadé’s poetry:

Schehadé a la voix (...) de celui qui parle de choses immémoriales: Dieu, la Bible, un Christ de miséricorde, qui fait pleurer les femmes et les hommes. L’hiver, le soleil, l’amour d’une femme, la mort en ce jardin qui

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<sup>58</sup> Saint-John Perse’s comments appear on the back cover of Georges Schehadé Oeuvres complètes.

s'appelle la Terre. (...) C'est bien notre pays qui est nommé, mais pays devenu abstrait (...) Schehadé aura mis dans sa poésie ce que l'Histoire du Liban n'a su proposer que par intermittence: accords parfaits (317-321).

Schehadé's poetic universe of dreams and fecund gardens is considered by some to be more reflective of a romantic rather than surrealist influence and, in fact, Schehadé, himself, resists being categorized as a surrealist, "je ne crois pas qu'on puisse trouver chez moi traces de leur influence." (Baglione 300) Whatever his declared affiliation, Khoury-Ghata demonstrates a strong poetic bond with this poet of Greek Orthodox middle-class origins. His use in lyrical form of the comic and tragic in the guise of the whimsical resonates in her poetry, which adopts, in contrast, a more cynical and narrative approach.

One of the dimensions of Schehadé's poetry that also mesmerizes in Khoury-Ghata's verse is his frequent portrayal of the female figure, suggestive of a nocturnal surrealist "médiatrice" who occupies a privileged position between the carnal and spiritual, the terrestrial and celestial: "La nuit va descendre la Tour de l'esprit / sur les seins des femmes il y aura des étoiles égarées" (Poésies I, VI).<sup>59</sup> Moreover, his verses praise the virtues of feminine family members, exemplified by his pious mother. The following verses from Schehadé's Le nageur d'un seul amour, "poésie V," serve as an example:

Ma mère allumait les lampes pour éloigner les  
ombres de nous

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<sup>59</sup> All of Schehadé's verses cited in this study appear in his Oeuvres complètes.



Elle comptait notre âge sur les doigts quand  
 l'horloge frappait ses coups  
 Ma mère parlait du temps qui passe en souriant  
 Et les hommes qui la suivaient étaient les anges (113)

Khoury-Ghata's more somber portrait of the maternal figure, circumscribed by lamplight in "Basse enfance," offers an interesting comparison.

Prisonnière du cercle étroit de sa lampe  
 elle nous parlait des prairies dallées par la lune  
 (...)  
 Ma mère se plaignait d'insomnies  
 dues aux conciliabules des anges sous ses fenêtres (Anthologie personnelle 34)

Another image that resonates in Khoury-Ghata's verse is Schehadé's portrait of the female figure engaged in domestic tasks. Probably reflecting the fact that his mother worked as a seamstress for friends and family, his verse depicts women sewing. In the collection L'Ecolier sultan, his poem "Marguerite" declares, "C'est ta machine à coudre / Qui appelle les oiseaux nocturnes." Another poem, addressed to "Marie," contains the refrain, "Ton rêve est une bobine." References to Biblical and sacred figures are common in his poems. Mixing the sacred and erotic, his verses address the Virgin Mary as a seductive madonna: "Tu m'inquiètes jeune fille / Le feuillage est fou de toi." One quatrain dedicated to the "Saintes Femmes" invokes enigmatic "femme angéliques et noires" (Le nageur d'un seul amour, X).

Other mythical and exotic figures populate Schehadé's verse, including medusas,

an Amazon, gypsies, and Aphrodite. Phenomena include “femmes aux aisselles d’oursins” in “Ex-voto” and “la dame [qui avait] dégonflé ses seins” in “Les saltimbanques.” Finally, Schehadé frequently pays homage to his mother. “Ma mère” represent the first two words of his odes to the maternal figure. He also addresses tributes to his aunts as well as the Lebanese poet Nadia Tuéni, who died prematurely of cancer. His verses delicately euphemize death: “Reste le souvenir de ta voix / Depuis qu’elle est dans ce pays lointain / Où toutes les femmes se ressemblent” (Le nageur d’un seul amour, XVI).

Seamstress and knitter, as well as angel and the Virgin Mary, are found in Khoury-Ghata’s verse. Likewise, her verse features mythical feminine figures, phenomena associated with feminine figures, and tributes to her mother, similarly invoked as “ma mere” at the beginning of poems. This study of Khoury-Ghata’s verse will demonstrate in other chapters that not only does she treat similar themes, particularly with regard to the feminine figure, but she also appears to have adopted some of Schehadé’s verse structure. For instance, he uses the anaphor “je dis”:

Je dis fleur de montagne pour dire  
Solitude  
Je dis liberté pour dire l'espoir (poésie II, VII)

Khoury-Ghata's verses in "Orties" use the same anaphor, but adopt the negative rhetoric of euphemism:

Je dis hommes pour ne pas dire sauterelles  
 Je dis sauterelles pour ne pas dire fétus de paille fanes de maïs  
 (Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 19)

However many correspondences link the two poets, Khoury-Ghata's verse rarely soars with what Jean-Pierre Richard describes as the “verticalité imaginaire” of Schehadé’s lyricism that elevates the reader to an exquisite state of enchantment.<sup>60</sup> Though she honors Schehadé as a precursor, Khoury-Ghata’s poetic practice is distinguished by its profound attachment to the earth and its chthonian evocations, as if burdened by the gravity of sorrows.

Another renowned Francophone Lebanese poet is the aforementioned Nadia Tuéni (1925-1983). The daughter of a Druze diplomat and French mother, she married into the influential Christian Tuéni family (her husband Ghassan Tuéni manages the Lebanese daily Al-Nahar). Her son, Gibran, also affiliated with the newspaper, was assassinated in 2005). Following the loss of her young daughter to cancer, Tuéni began publishing in the early 1960s and established a writing career in verse and prose that lasted until her death two decades later. Affiliated with surrealist writers and the short-lived Lebanese literary review "Shi'r," Tuéni wrote poetry both as a spiritual quest and a protest against conflict in the Middle East and Lebanon’s downward spiral toward civil war. Like Khoury-Ghata, Tuéni navigated between Arabic and French in an effort to accommodate a dual identity.

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<sup>60</sup> See Richard’s essay on Schehadé in Onze études sur la poésie moderne (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964) 173-197.

Poètes étrangers ou poètes du Liban? Telle est la question politico-culturelle qui sans cesse se pose à nous qui écrivons en français dans un pays où il existe une langue officielle autre.(...) A l'égal de l'arabe, le français nous est langue "naturelle"; l'adopter librement, choix lucide s'entend, ne veut nullement dire rejeter notre identité moyen-orientale et arabe, mais bien au contraire, la consacrer, la magnifier, et la rendre plus agissante en lui offrant vers d'autres mondes, vers tous ceux que lie l'amour des mêmes mots, le moyen de se faire connaître, de prendre et de donner, but profond de toute culture."<sup>61</sup>

Another correspondence that links Khoury-Ghata to Tuéni is the latter's use of myth and female archetypes to express Lebanese feminine identity. In Juin et les Mécéants, written in response to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Tuéni proposes a mise-en-scène of four feminine figures symbolizing diverse components of a Machreq feminine identity: Tidimir, the Christian, Sioun, the Druze, Sabba, the Muslim, and Dâhum the Jew. Tuéni's poetic oeuvre, like that of Khoury-Ghata, gives the impression of seeking to forge personal and collective identities in the context of irreparable loss. Haunted by death, her verse is marked by melancholy, nostalgia, and a desire for reconciliation; however there are enormous differences in their approaches. Tuéni employs an earnest lyrical voice, often represented by the first person singular, and favors landscape and nature as major themes in the context of her attachment to the Lebanese homeland. In contrast, Khoury-Ghata's verse is characterized by a narrative style that employs the "je" more sparingly. The human figure occupying the center of Khoury-Ghata's universe sometimes incarnates violence and expresses an "erotisme" and irony that are completely absent from Tuéni's verse. Khoury-Ghata dedicates verses in "Inhumations" (Quelle est

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<sup>61</sup> Nadia Tuéni, La Prose. Oeuvres complètes (Beyrouth: Dar an-Nahar, 1986) 64-65.

la nuit parmi les nuits) to Tueni's husband, Ghassan, whose publishing house Dar an-Nahar produced her first collection of previously published verse, Mon Anthologie, in 1993.

Another contemporary Lebanese poet who shares common ground with Khoury-Ghata is Salah Stétié (born 1929), a former diplomat, of Muslim origins, who has published poetry, prose, essays, and translations. Contact with French poets like Pierre Jean Jouve and Yves Bonnefoy nurtured his poetic vocation, rooted in a desire to establish relations with the Other, according to his stance in Archer aveugle: “Epouser l’autre, pour si autre qu’il fut, l’épouser et lui faire l’enfant du miracle.”<sup>62</sup> Memories of family in Lebanon, the female figure, and Mediterranean mythology also figure prominently in Stétié’s work; however, as Zahida Darwiche Jabbour indicates, his poetic approach is described as hermetic, even “mallarméenne,” underscored by his propensity for the metaphysical (110-112). He was awarded the Grand Prix de la Francophonie in 1995. Stétié and Khoury-Ghata collaborated on a text, Stèle pour l’absent (Alain Gorius, Paris: Al-Manar, 2006), which pays homage to the medieval knights of Lodève on a pilgrimage to St Jacques de Compostelle. Stétié writes in the preface: “La stèle ravive l’absent qu’elle abolit, l’absence ronge la stèle qu’elle amplifie.” Khoury-Ghata, who writes in verse to accompany Alain Gorius' prose, conjures the same mineral substance: “Stèles / immobiles sur leur pied unique / Pélerins pétrifiés en pleine marche / rocheux à face d’attente / hommes rudimentaires semis vertical de pierres (...) (14). Although this memorial to the dead is representative of themes in Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre, the title is

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<sup>62</sup> Salah Stétié, Archer aveugle (Paris: Editions Fata Morgana, 1985) 181-183.

rarely included in her bibliography.

Schehadé, Tuéni, and Stétié, represent some of the most inspiring voices in Francophone Lebanese poetry in the twentieth-century. While, among them, Schehadé appears to have exercised the most influence on Khoury-Ghata's poetry, their collective contribution to the expression of a dual identity based on the contact of French and Arab cultures serves as a repository of Lebanese poetic tradition that sustains Khoury-Ghata oeuvre.

#### The Heritage of Arab Poetry in Twentieth Century Lebanon

Given that Khoury-Ghata did not leave Lebanon to establish residence in Paris until she was in her early thirties, a study of her poetry would be incomplete without taking measure of the evolution of modern Arab poetry and its status in Lebanon, which contributed to her formation as a writer. She attests: "J'ai ma propre poésie qui vient d'ailleurs (...) de la poésie arabe."<sup>63</sup> Arab literary critic and poet Salma Khadra Jayyusi's 42-page introduction to the anthology Modern Arabic Poetry discusses poetry's privileged position in Arab society in as much as it emerged from a pre-Islamic nomadic desert culture in which the oral performance of poetry served as the supreme artistic expression. Jayyusi explains that during the initial Islamic period, memorizing and reciting the Qur'an took precedence and poetry did not recover its status until the late seventh century when the Umayyad caliphs called on poets to glorify their words and

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<sup>63</sup> Personal interview.

deeds. This led to the cultivation of poetry as a revered practice that transmitted to succeeding generations a refined interpretation of historical figures and events.

Centuries-long traditions of poetic structures and themes experienced seismic changes in the twentieth-century, especially with the introduction of free verse ("al-sh'ir al-hurr") in the late 1940s. Until then, Arab verse had been governed by a fixed pattern, whose symmetry and balance was supported by a two-hemistich monorhymed arrangement, and the same number of feet in each verse.<sup>64</sup>

Jayyusi indicates that the 1950s and 1960s in Lebanon witnessed an outburst of poetic experimentation reflecting disillusionment with and rejection of traditional values in all spheres, especially the political, precipitated by the establishment of Israel in 1948, the subsequent Palestinian diaspora, and Lebanon's descent into sectarian violence. The failure of Arab nationalist ideologies to cope with political and economic crises radicalized Arab intellectuals in Lebanon and elsewhere, and shaped the engagement of writers and poets who challenged conventional forms and themes.

Jayyusi does not discuss how the tumultuous 1970s is marked by the proliferation of women novelists and poets, both Francophone and Arabophone, whose revolt against an oppressive patriarchal system is precipitated by the breakdown of Lebanese society engaged in civil war.<sup>65</sup> Literary critic Mariam Cooke identifies Lebanese women writers

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<sup>64</sup> Jayyusi provides details about the structure of Arabic verse. 8-9.

<sup>65</sup> Rose Ghurayyib also attributes the rise of Arab women poets in the twentieth-century to the expansion of girls' schools and co-education in universities. "Contemporary Women Poets." ed. Evelyn Accad and Rose Ghurayyib, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers and Poets*, (Beirut: Beirut University College, Institute for Arab Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1985) 60.

of the period, including Khoury-Ghata, as Beirut Decentrists who were “involved in the war, not as fighters, but as conflict resolvers and as mothers, both real and potential” (166). Nathalie Handal’s introduction to the anthology The Poetry of Arab Women further explains that Lebanese women writers of this period “focus on the harsh, brutal realities of daily life and on the violence that infiltrated their minds and existence” (15). Their writing reveals a range of emotions that mirror what Jarrysi describes in the general context of Arab poets as the literary expression of the day: sorrow, disgust, shame, anger, frustration, and alienation (16). In her doctoral study on Lebanese women novelists, Anne-Sophie Riquier suggests that the strategy of these women writers allows them to transform “la douleur du deuil et la colère de la ruine” into a project “pour repousser le chaos et oeuvrer à la régénérescence.” She adds that by rewriting myth, they transcend “l’inaccessible particularisme pour renouer avec une Humanité universelle et refonder la fraternité essentielle”.<sup>66</sup>

Khoury-Ghata’s move to France in 1972 several years before the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war cast her as a writer in exile, whose distance from the turmoil afforded her a remote perspective. She concedes that her writing, which is distinguished by its explicit as well as implicit autobiographical content, would have been difficult to represent if she had remained in Lebanon: “If I had lived only in Beirut, I’m sure I

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<sup>66</sup> These citations are extracted from the abstract of Anne-Sophie Riquier’s doctoral thesis, Les femmes du Liban face à la guerre: Itinéraire et enjeux d’un parcours romanesque, defended at the Sorbonne in 2006. [www.paris-sorbonne.fr](http://www.paris-sorbonne.fr), consulted 11/4/2008.



wouldn't have been able to write even one line".<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, in spite of her departure from Lebanon to live with her new husband in France, her oeuvre exhibits the anguish and dismay of a writer witnessing the violence close at hand. The following verses from Au sud du silence (1975) represent her emphatic protest against war.

ARMES d'épis de blé  
 ILS CRIENT LE MOT GUERRE  
 pour son orthographe

TRACENT LE MOT FEU  
 puis la cernent dans l'âtre  
 EPAULENT LEURS FUSILS  
 mais pour s'y appuyer  
 ATTENDENT LE PREMIER MAI  
 l'effeuillent comme un muguet

ILS SERONT FUSILLES  
 LE DOS CONTRE UN MUR  
 PAR UNE FAFALE...de pluie

Khoury-Ghata avoids comparing her writing with that of other Lebanese or Arab women poets; however she pays tribute to several Arab women writers in her article "Roman de femmes autour de la Méditerranée"(64), which discusses the scandal provoked by women writers addressing taboo subjects. Firstly, she acknowledges the Lebanese-Palestinian poet May Ziadé as an early twentieth-century precursor whose correspondence with the Lebanese poet Gibran Khalil Gibran was the subject of scandal. Recognizing the groundbreaking Lebanese novelist, Laila Baalbaki, whose description of

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<sup>67</sup> Corinna Hasofferet, "Destiny's Choice" in Jacket 18, August 2002.  
<http://jacketmagazine.com/18/khour.html>, consulted on 5/2/2007.

her mother's body in her novel, Ana Ahia ("I Live"), scandalized readers in the 1960s, Khoury-Ghata chides critics for not having understood "la tendresse qui émanait de ces descriptions, le ventre maternel, même flétri, exprimant le désir d'y retourner, de s'y protéger, de redevenir un fœtus" (65). She also expresses solidarity with Hanan al-Cheikh, whose Hikayat Zahra (Story of Zahra) evokes the theme of the adulteress in her own novel, La maîtresse du notable. Far from scandal, another modest sign of Khoury-Ghata's attachment to an Arab woman writer is her dedication of verse in her first collection, Mon Anthologie, to the poet and novelist Andrée Chedid who, like Khoury-Ghata, has lived in Paris for decades and is often identified as a Francophone poet of Egyptian origins even though she also has ties to Lebanon.<sup>68</sup>

In contrast, Khoury-Ghata often invokes in interviews and in her oeuvre the name of the male Lebanese poet, Gibran Khalil Gibran, recognized by contemporary literary critics as playing a vital role in the modernization of Arab poetry in Lebanon and, indeed, in the Arab world. When Gibran was an adolescent, his mother moved the family to the United States. Except for a brief sojourn back to Lebanon, he spent most of his life there. His encounter with American ideas at the turn of the century, including the poetry of Emerson, Longfellow, and Whitman, permeated his writing and art. According to Jayyusi, Gibran "was the single most important influence on Arab poetry and literature" in the first half of the twentieth century, because he, along with other Arab poets of the Mahjar group (Arab immigrants to the United States), broke with an Arab neoclassical tradition that had grown stale. Their instrument of change was an Americanized

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<sup>68</sup> Critical studies in France and in the U.S. focus on Chedid's novels, poetry, and plays.

Romanticism that expressed a yearning for individual freedom, which challenged the authority and conformity imposed by traditional Arab conventions. Jayussi does not think highly of Gibran's verse; however, she asserts that his prose poems and poetic prose were innovative, in as much as he introduced into Arab verse, otherwise steeped in Islamic culture, elements from the Bible and Western literature and culture that established a new poetic vision.

This new spirit launched direct incisive attacks against political inertia in the Arab homeland, and struggled against social injustice and outmoded traditions that shackled the individual and suffocated his or her life. It spoke for change and revolution and awakened people's souls to new possibilities for Freedom (5).

Khoury-Ghata often refers to Gibran's influence on her writing. Her esteem for him is undoubtedly amplified by the fact that his tomb is located in proximity to her aunt's house in the Lebanese village of Bcharré, where she and her siblings spent time during their childhood. According to one anecdote in her autobiographical novel, Une Maison au bord des larmes, the return of Gibran's remains there precipitated "pour la première fois" the movement of her brother in his mother's womb, thus fixing his destiny as a poet (52). However, her brother later abandoned Gibran's prose for alexandrines. Khoury-Ghata claims to have read in Arabic, during her childhood, all of Gibran's work, which she describes as "très beaux" but "trop épiques, trop lyriques."<sup>69</sup> She was

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<sup>69</sup> Oumhani.

especially moved after having read his collection of aphorisms, Ecume et Sable, and claims to have decided then, "je deviendrai poète".<sup>70</sup> Indeed, her verses in Terres stagnantes (1969) reveal fragments of Gibran's title:

Parce que tu ne sais pas où échouent les sables et les  
oiseaux bilingues  
Dans quel monde subit chutent les soleils, le soir  
Je te nomme écume (...)

In addition, the recurrence of adages in her own oeuvre evokes one of Gibran's innovations which evolved as a trend in the 1950s, according to Jayyusi, who links Arab poets' use of colloquial language to T.S. Eliot's dictum in The Music of Poetry: "every revolution in poetry is apt to be, and sometimes to announce itself to be a return to common speech" (27). Khoury-Ghata's admiration for Gibran is reinforced in the documentary film Vénus Khoury-Ghata. Un Français aux saveurs de l'Orient, which features the landscape and people of the Lebanese mountain village of her childhood. In the film, she alludes to one of Gibran's most celebrated verses when she says: "Donne-moi la flûte qui chante." His couplet from Chant 5 in Le Livre des Processions (Al Mawakeb), in fact, reads: Donne-moi le nay et chante! / Le nay est justice pour les coeurs".<sup>71</sup>

The Romantic movement in Arab poetry was succeeded in the 1930s by

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<sup>70</sup> "Entretien avec Vénus Khoury-Ghata" in Espace Francophone appears in the Annexes of Anne-Sophie Riquier's mémoire de maîtrise, L'Affirmation du "je" féminin à travers deux romans de Vénus Khoury-Ghata, defended at the Sorbonne, juin 2001.

<sup>71</sup> Le Sable et l'écume et autres poèmes, Trans. Thierry Gillyboeuf (Editions Point, 2008).

symbolism, represented by the Lebanese poet Sa'id 'Aql (also spelled Akl), whose long poem Al-Majdaliyya recounts the meeting of Christ and Mary Magdalene, a Christian theme that Jarrysi determines was novel at the time (7). Khoury-Ghata alludes to a fortuitous encounter with "Saidak" [sic], who ensured that her first poems were published.<sup>72</sup> Joseph Zeidan notes that 'Aql was one of many poets affiliated with the founder of a Syrian nationalist movement Antun Sa'adah, whose book Al-Sira al-fikri fi al-Adab al-Suri (The Intellectual Conflict in Syrian Literature) advocates the re-appropriation of native mythology and its themes of cyclical regeneration and rebirth. Sa'adah's ideas encouraged the revival of Phoenician and Babylonian myths. One re-interpretation of myth is represented by 'Aql's poetic play Qadmus which recounts the story of Cadmus, an ancient Syrian who, according to legend, taught the alphabet to the Greeks.<sup>73</sup> 'Aql also proposed a romanized system of writing for colloquial Lebanese, which he represented in his work, Yara; however his ideas were not widely accepted. Similar myths of cyclical regeneration and rebirth are critical to Khoury-Ghata's mythico-poetic stance. She also conjures the figure Mary Magdalene in Qui parle au nom du jasmín and in her portrait of a prostitute named Magida in "Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse." Moreover, she alludes to the myth of Cadmus in the verses of "Les mots," inspired by the history of the Phoenician alphabet.

Precipitated by the use of free verse, Arab poetic experimentation of the 1950s

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<sup>72</sup> Hasofferet.

<sup>73</sup> Joseph Zeidan, "Myth and Symbol in the Poetry of Adunis and Yusuf al-Khal." Journal of Arab Literature, Vol. 10, (1979): 70-94.

and 1960s was also nurtured by the translation into Arabic of foreign poets, like Pound, Eliot, Rilke, Lorca, Rimbaud, Perse, Eluard, Aragon, and Yeats. However, according to Jayyusi, it was T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" that had the greatest impact on the use of the fertility myth in Arab poetry.

The idea of a death that leads to a new birth attracted them deeply. Fertility myths such as those of Adonis or Tammuz, which were associated with the area many centuries ago but had been submerged by monotheism, were no longer alive on the lips of people. Modern Arab poets resurrected the myths of fertility from books, especially from Frazer's The Golden Bough (...) They also benefitted from commentaries on Eliot's poem and other critical writings (22).

As Jayyusi points out, they were known as the Tammuzian Poets who adopted the myths of Baal and the Phoenix to represent resurrection and renewal, and explored other myths such as Sisyphus and Prometheus. In her essay "La Poésie arabe au Moyen-Orient," Khoury-Ghata recognizes the legacy of numerous Arab poets of this period, whom she affirms as having forged "un langage nouveau" based on ancient traditions and Western poetic practices.<sup>74</sup> Highlighting the presence of the feminine figure in the verse of Lebanese poets in particular, she singles out Ounsi el Hage for having achieved "une symbiose heureuse de la femme et de l'écriture." Khoury-Ghata's translation of his verse in the poem "Irradiante" reflects her admiration:

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<sup>74</sup> Khoury-Ghata enumerates the names of numerous Lebanese poets, as well as Iraqi, Egyptian, and Palestinian poets. 74-78.

Celle qui ressemble à un soir de guerre  
 Celle qui irradie  
 Celle qui s'infiltré dans son ombre  
 Celle qui retourne boire dans sa cage comme l'oiseau  
 Celle qui pose les énigmes  
 Et qui ne fait don d'aucune de ses mains  
 Celle qui descend  
 Et qui court dans son sommeil  
 Quand la foudre est paralysée<sup>75</sup>

The nocturnal and mystical tone of el Hage's poem is indicative of other correspondences that show Khoury-Ghata's affinity with other Arab poets. She demonstrates enthusiasm for Shawqi Abi Shaqra (spelled here as Chawki Abi Chaera), whose surrealist expression incorporates "images du terroir," and admires his mixing "la pâte linguistique à la langue paysanne." In fact, a cursory glance at his prose poetry suggests that Khoury-Ghata's verse could have been inspired by some of his expressions. For instance, one poem features the ironic statement, "The neighbors think I'm a star,"<sup>76</sup> and includes the sentence, "I read the newspaper upside down," an act of inversion represented in Khoury-Ghata's sequence "Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse" by the figure of "Mokhtar" who "lit à l'envers le journal" (Elle dit 76). The same poem's personification of an Arabic language signifier, "I stand alone with the hamza" also evokes Khoury-Ghata's manipulation of the Arabic alphabet in numerous verses. In addition, a portrait of a grandmother in "Water for the Family Horse" depicts her "leaning

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<sup>75</sup> Abdel Kader El-Janabi, Eternité volante (Paris: Actes Sud 1997) 91.

<sup>76</sup> Shawqi Abi Shaqra, trans. Mansour Ajami, "Bearing Witness: Recent Literature from Lebanon," Literary Review, Spring (1994): Farleigh Dickinson University, Consulted on line 30/3/09.

on a breeze." Similarly, Khoury-Ghata's "Les mots," depicts feminine figures who "s'appuyaient sur l'air comme au bras d'un fiancé" (Compassion des pierres 25).

In the same article, Khoury-Ghata briefly mentions Khalil Hawi. As Jayussi points out, the latter interprets the folk myth of Sinbad in "Sinbad on His Eighth Voyage" and portrays another seafarer in "The Mariner and the Dervish" (22). These protagonists evoke the history of Phoenician sea merchants. In a similar fashion, Khoury-Ghata represents seafarers in "Les Marins Sans Navire" ("The Sailors Without a Ship") in Nettles (2008). "Les marins sans navire ont d'étranges hallucinations quand la mer / fait son ménage saisonnier"(190).

Khoury-Ghata also highlights the name of Adonis (Ali Ahmad Esbar, b. 1930), "considéré parmi les plus grands" (75). One of the most renowned contemporary Arab poets in France, if not the world, Adonis is admired as a master of reviving Arab myths, represented by his celebrated work Chants de Mihyar, le Damascène (1961). Jayussi admires his "[development of] a deep mythic sense of history in which the flowing together of all periods and the immanence of the past in the present are delineated to yield a sense of the simultaneity of human experience, the power of history to recycle itself endlessly" (23). She also attributes Adonis' legacy to the fact that his poetic adventure invested language with a mysteriousness and obliqueness that defy logic and convention (27).

Aside from Adonis' touted role as a pioneer in modern Arab poetry, what is interesting here is his connection to Vénus Khoury-Ghata. Firstly, as a partisan of revolt in life and art, Adonis espouses the idea that "poetry is not craft and expression, but



creation and visions,” and that “creativity entails transgression, not obedience and subordination”.<sup>77</sup> This approach demonstrates a rapport with Khoury-Ghata’s poetics, which favor the dynamic forces of extravagant imagery and subversive practices. Moreover, Adonis harbors a passionate attachment to French poetry. His Introduction to Arab Poetics attributes his understanding of traditional Arab poets to his close readings of the French poets Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Nerval, and Rimbaud.<sup>78</sup> His proposed rapprochement of two movements in Soufisme et Surréalisme (1992) not only underscores his attachment to surrealism, it also accentuates his objective of linking an ancient spiritual practice to a modern secular movement. In a similar manner, Khoury-Ghata’s poetics tie together elements of surrealism and mysticism, and move toward the collapsing of the past and present. Translations of Adonis’ oeuvre are so widely available in France that one might mistake him for a Francophone poet. In fact, he has benefited from the services of numerous translators, one of whom happens to be Khoury-Ghata, who translated his Commencement du corps fin de l’océan (2004) and has been working on another forthcoming book of poetry. Their collaboration on the former text led to joint public readings in France and abroad. Furthermore, like Khoury-Ghata, Adonis has translated poets, including Saint-John Perse, Georges Schehadé, and Yves Bonnefoy.

Moreover, she and Adonis both use an interesting poetic conceit that involves

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<sup>77</sup> Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi, “Engaging Tradition in Modern Arab Poetics,” Journal of Arab Literature, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2002): 185.

<sup>78</sup> Adonis, Introduction to Arab Poetics, trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Saqi Press, 1996) 81.

personifying letters of the Arabic alphabet. For example, Adonis' verses "An Introduction to the History of the Petty Kings" in A Time Between Ashes and Roses,<sup>79</sup> portray the Arabic letters bâ, jîm, Alif, hâ, and râ in the following stanza:

The letter bâ uncovered her head, jîm is a lock of hair: Perish, perish...  
 Alif is the first letter: Perish, perish...  
 I hear the letter hâ sobbing; and râ is like the crescent moon  
 Immersed, dissolving in the sands.  
 Perish, perish (11)

In "Les mots," Khoury-Ghata represents letters of the Arabic alphabet, including the letters Aleph and "Ba," as follows:

Aleph souffle de droite à gauche  
 pour effacer dunes et chameliers  
 qui comptent les étoiles dans le sable  
 douze fois de suite  
 Ainsi

C'est dans la bassine du "Ba" qu'on lave le sang menstruel  
 de la lune  
 dans le cuivre pérenne  
 quand les femmes sur les terrasses nocturnes font des voeux  
 irréfléchis (Compassion des pierres 11)

Both poets thus evoke the sacred and tragic desert origins of the Arabic language whose transformation from letters into figures produces startling images. This figuration of letters perhaps reflects both poets' attachment to Rimbaud, whose poem "Voyelles"

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<sup>79</sup> Adonis, A Time Between Ashes and Roses, trans. Shawkat M. Toorawa (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

comes to mind in this context. Analysis of Khoury-Ghata's "Les mots" in a subsequent chapter of this study will further develop this type of representation.

Leaving aside these interesting correspondences, the approaches of Adonis and Khoury-Ghata diverge. For instance, Adonis privileges the "je," as the oratorical and prophetic voice of an individual masculine protagonist. In contrast, except for her early poems, Khoury-Ghata eschews the "je" and favors the indirect self-reference "tu." More frequently, she places another feminine figure or figures, "elle(s)," at the center of her poetic universe. In addition, titles of her work, such as Ils and Les Obscurcis signal her emphasis on the collective. Adonis' poetic universe is arguably more vast and complex than Khoury-Ghata's poetic domain that remains geographically rooted in Lebanon, in general, and domestic village life, in particular.<sup>80</sup> What my study suggests is that the poetic impulses of Khoury-Ghata and Adonis strike a common chord, and that this should surprise no one given their common heritage of poetry in Lebanon and Greater Syria, their shared affinity for particular French poets and movements, and their professional working relationship.

Having established some of Khoury-Ghata's ties to Arab poetic movements and specific poets, this study will also examine some characteristics and genres of Arabic poetry that mark her poetry. Among the themes that Jayussi discusses in her introduction to Modern Arab Poetry, the tragic victim as representative of the human predicament in the Arab world and the City as "the center of exploitation and misery" are two notions

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<sup>80</sup> This is not necessarily true of her novels, which represent a more extensive geographical area in the Middle East, North Africa, and Mexico, and include portraits of urban and village life.

that are inscribed in Khoury-Ghata's work. Jayussi notes that many poets, including Gibran, display "hatred of city life" in contrast with an "Arcadian longing for Nature and the country" (32). Anne-Sophie Riquier's doctoral thesis accurately observes the latter phenomenon in Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre: "si les romans sont plutôt ancrés dans un monde urbain souvent contemporain (...) les poèmes à l'inverse, s'enracinent davantage dans un univers bucolique, plus calme, où le temps paraît comme suspendu et où la parole, terrienne [sic], permet à l'écrivaine à la fois de reprendre une tradition orale ancestrale pour la transmettre au fil de ses recueils (...)" (257).

One genre of Arab verse that is affiliated especially with women poets is the elegy. According to Nathalie Handal: "The participation of women poets in the writing of elegies (from pre-Islamic times up until the beginning of the twentieth century) is well-known, as is the strong oral tradition of composing and reciting poetry among women, which has played an important role in the evolution and literary history of the Arab and Islamic world" (2). The elegiac genre, known as "marthiya" in Arabic, survives as a feminine art perhaps because public mourning on the part of Arab women, traditionally excluded from public discourse, is a socially acceptable practice. Much of Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre functions as an elegy honoring the disappearance of family and victims in Lebanon's conflicts.

Although the integration of colloquial Arabic is considered a new development in modern Arab poetry, the use of "zajal," a vernacular form of verse with Andalusian origins, arguably represents an exception. The Arab literary critic Adnan Haydar explains that in the Lebanese tradition, "[zajal] means primarily oral vernacular poetry, in

general, a discourse in many forms, composed in or for performance, declaimed or sung to the accompaniment of music. It is also used to characterize a written tradition which attains high literary value and high formal virtuosity in the compositions of famous Lebanese poets.”<sup>81</sup> The vernacular of "zajal" has produced Maronite hymns as well as contemporary Lebanese folksongs. One type of "zajal", called "al-alifiyyat," requires that the first letter of each verse represent the Arabic alphabet in sequence. Khoury-Ghata's integration of the Arabic alphabet in numerous poems suggests a contemporary interpretation of this vernacular form that allows poets to show off their poetic technique and knowledge of local history and literature.

This review of French and Arab poetic traditions suggests to what extent Khoury-Ghata's poetic form and themes have been influenced by their fortuitous contact. France's pervasive influence on Lebanese writers, represented by the legacy of poets like Baudelaire and Rimbaud and the circulation of surrealist notions, had a major impact on modern Francophone poets, such as Georges Schehadé; however the resilience of Arabophone poets, such as Adonis, who have revived their own heritage and accepted the same French and other non-Arab influences on their own terms, prevails. The most important innovations for modern Lebanese poetry, spearheaded by Gibran Khalil Gibran, included experimentation with poetic forms like the prose poem and, later, free verse, as well as extensive and robust interpretation of myths of Western and Arab origins.

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<sup>81</sup> Adnan Haydar, "The Development of Lebanese Zajal: Genre, Meter, and Verbal Duel." Oral Tradition. 4/1-2 (1989): 190.

For Khoury-Ghata, the abandonment of traditional forms, audacity of the surrealist imagination, and revitalization of myth, particularly Christian and Phoenician myths, as well as Lebanese folklore, represent significant influences on the development of her poetic voice. In addition, like the writing of her female Lebanese peers, Khoury-Ghata's poetic universe represents a protest against misogynist practices and violence in Lebanon, which extends to a quest for reconciling differences and memorializing the dead. She also aligns herself with certain Francophone and Arabophone women writers who defy conventions and the censure of feminine expression. In this manner, Khoury-Ghata's mythico-poetic approach will be shown to evoke Véronique Gély's notion of myth, which expresses difference, otherness, and scandal.<sup>82</sup>

French language and culture have bequeathed Khoury-Ghata with a poetic heritage of interrogation and revolt, which has allowed her to challenge certain Lebanese traditions while maintaining a fervent attachment to others. This engagement generates a passionate loyalty to the poetic heritage of her Arab Lebanese mother tongue and maternal culture, which is manifested by her representation of the Arabic alphabet, colloquial expressions, and oral tradition, all of which tend to highlight the gestures and utterances of the ordinary Lebanese woman. Paying homage to the recently deceased Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwich, Khoury-Ghata describes his verse as "géopoétique", a term that aptly evokes her own quest for the rapprochement of two poetic territories.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Véronique Gély, "Les sexes de la mythologie. Mythes, littérature et gender." *Littérature et identités sexuelles*. Eds. Anne Tomiche and Pierre Zoberman (Collections poétiques comparatistes SFLGC. 2007) 49.

<sup>83</sup> "La Palestine pleure le poète Mahmoud Darwich." *Le Figaro*. Monday, 11 August, 2008.

Her essay "Pourquoi j'écris en Français" captures similar sentiments: "J'appartenais à une patrie de papier dont je pouvais défaire ou refaire la géographie au gré de mes besoins (...)" (18).

## Chapter 3

### Myth and the Maternal: Theories and Critical Studies

#### Introduction

The words "myth" and "maternal voice" in my dissertation's title evoke two axes that form the theoretical base of my research. This chapter will discuss theories and critical studies that support my analysis of Khoury-Ghata's poetry. Among them is French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's theory of semiotics, published in La Révolution du langage poétique (1974). My examination draws on her conceptualization of the signification of language as a product of two contrasting forces, the semiotic and the symbolic, and her determination of the maternal body as the site where language is processed. My study also takes into account Kristeva's treatment of the maternal and the sacred in "Stabat Mater" in Histoires d'amour (1983) and in Desire in Language (1980), her approach to temporality and gender in Les Nouvelles maladies de l'âme (1993), and her exploration of melancholia's link to the maternal in Soleil Noir: Dépression et mélancolie (1987), as well as the abject in Pouvoirs de l'horreur (1980). Although Kristeva avoids being exclusively identified with a feminist agenda and, indeed, has been a target of feminist criticism, she remains a longstanding partisan of women's issues and an advocate of the ethics of healing and reconciliation. My comprehension of Kristeva's theory has been facilitated by the commentary and English translations of excerpts from her seminal works, available in Toril Moi's The Kristeva Reader (1986), Kelly Oliver's The Portable Kristeva (1997), and Leon S. Roudiez's



Black Sun (1989).<sup>84</sup>

As for myth, French anthropologist and sociologist Gilbert Durand's Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire, published in the 1960s, proposes to organize structures, archetypes, and symbols, into a binary classification of images that distinguishes between diurnal and nocturnal orders. Exhibiting the influences of Structuralism, Durand's vision of opposing systems, like Kristeva's Formalist-inspired juxtaposition of the semiotic and the symbolic, is dichotomous. Both theories conceive of one system that negates/subverts/inverts the values of another. Furthermore, Durand's nocturnal order attributes a privileged role to the maternal figure and pre-oedipal drives, and thus coincides with Kristeva's emphasis of the maternal and pre-oedipal in language signification.

My approach to Khoury-Ghata's poetry has also benefited enormously from the work of Pierre Brunel, a scholar of comparative literature and myth who has made valuable contributions to the theory of "mythocritique" and its application in modern French literature and culture. In addition to profiting from his review of history and method in Mythocritique: Théorie et parcours (1992), my research gleaned information from two tomes of essays that he edited, Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires (1988) and Dictionnaire des mythes féminins (2002). The former was critical to my construction of Khoury-Ghata's mythico-poetic position, and both dictionaries helped me identify mythical figures, archetypes, and themes that resonate in Khoury-Ghata's poetic

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<sup>84</sup> Toril Moi, The Kristeva Reader (London: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1986). Kelly Oliver, The Portable Kristeva (New York: Columbia Press, 1997). Black Sun, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

universe. In the footsteps of Durand and Brunel, critics Danièle Chauvin, Philippe Walter, and André Siganos, edited a collection of essays entitled Questions de mythocritique (2005), whose reflections on the dynamic role of myth in the context of diverse literary forms provide a framework for analyzing particular narratives and structures that support what I determine is the representation of myth of Khoury-Ghata's verse.

Finally, Véronique Gély and Sylvie Ballestra-Puech propose other points of view in their studies on gender and feminine figures in myth. Gély's essay, "Pour une mythopoétique: quelques propositions sur les rapports entre mythe et fiction" (2006)<sup>85</sup> interrogates the origins and meaning of "mythopoétique" and her aforementioned article, "Les Sexes de la mythologie. Mythes, littérature et gender" (2007), advocates myth as an expression of difference, otherness, and scandal. Gély's critical approach to feminine myths and Ballestra-Puech's in-depth studies of "les Parques" and "Arachné," whose figures are evoked in my examination of Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre, offer valuable insights on the history and status of mythical feminine figures in literature and the arts.<sup>86</sup> Their methodical research has been an inspiration to my work and promotes further study of the status of feminine mythical figures in French contemporary culture.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will, for the most part, focus on the concepts of the aforementioned scholars and critics; however, in subsequent chapters, my dissertation

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<sup>85</sup> Véronique Gély, "Pour une mythopoétique: quelques propositions sur les rapports entre mythe et fiction," Vox Poetica, 21/05/2006, [www.vox-poetica.org/sflgc/biblio/gely](http://www.vox-poetica.org/sflgc/biblio/gely), consulted 01/02/08.

<sup>86</sup> Sylvie Ballestra-Puech, Les Parques: Essai sur les figures du destin dans la littérature occidentale (Editions Universitaires du Sud, 1999). Métamorphoses d'Arachné. (Geneva: Droz, 2006).

will acknowledge and assimilate others whose ideas support my analysis of Khoury-Ghata's poetry.

### Kristeva and Khoury-Ghata: Commonplaces

An examination of Julia Kristeva's construction of the relationship between language and the maternal provides a useful framework for the study of Khoury-Ghata's poetry, in which maternal gestures and maternal language figure prominently. In this context, it is not my objective to analyze Kristeva's theory, although critical readings of Kristeva by renowned scholars, such as Toril Moi and Kelly Oliver, serve as references here. Nor will I delve into the complexities of psychoanalysis. Rather, my analysis will show to what extent Khoury-Ghata's verse reflects aspects of Kristeva's theory of poetic language initially developed in La Révolution du langage poétique (1974), and elaborated in her subsequent works.

Specific biographical resemblances are worth noting.<sup>87</sup> Khoury-Ghata, born in 1937, is only four years older than Kristeva, who was born in 1941. Both women moved to Paris as adults. Accompanying her second husband, a French citizen of Turkish origins, Khoury-Ghata, already a mother and writer, left her family in Lebanon to live in Paris in 1972. Kristeva, a young Bulgarian Marxist armed with a fellowship for doctoral studies, arrived in Paris in 1965. Both women succeeded in joining elite and predominantly masculine literary circles, as well as quickly establishing themselves as

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<sup>87</sup> Biographical information on Kristeva is available in introductions to Oliver's The Portable Kristeva and Moi's The Kristeva Reader. As for Khoury-Ghata, her autobiographical novels, Une Maison au bord des larmes and La Maison aux orties, supplement a small amount of biographical information available in Marilyn Hacker's introductions to translated collections of poetry.

writers in Paris. Khoury-Ghata frequented a milieu associated with the likes of Aragon, whose work she translated into Arabic. Kristeva penetrated the ranks occupied by avant-garde intellectuals, such as Roland Barthes and Philippe Sollers at the literary review Tel Quel.

As immigrants to the French capital, both Kristeva and Khoury-Ghata appear, throughout their careers, to have been acutely aware of the status of the outsider and the relationship between identity and difference as one marked by alienation and anguish. Their literary production suggests that their sensitivity to being an alien (subject-in-exile) contributed to their construction of an ethical approach, rooted in the maternal, that seeks understanding and tolerance of differences, and encourages co-habitation, if not the eradication of differences.

The two writers' exploration and reconciliation of tension provoked by different identities is particularly underscored by their devotion to the representation of woman, as a fundamental Other, and specifically that which is affiliated with the maternal in Francophone and other cultures. Early in her career, Kristeva's trip to China inspired her reflections on the condition of women in Des Chinoises and Khoury-Ghata's novels and poetry portray women in the Arab world and in Mexico. Both writers began to publish extensively in the 1970s and 1980s during an era when the feminine voice in France became more strident, sought recognition in all genres of French literature, and challenged what was perceived as an oppressive patriarchic phallogentric order. Both writers have witnessed and responded to violent political and social change, including a growing secularization of French and Francophone society. Kristeva was deeply affected

by Marxist ideology and the upheavals witnessed in France (1968) and elsewhere (Communist China). Khoury-Ghata's homeland, Lebanon, was (and remains) wracked by sectarian tensions and the threat of civil war.

Both writers are heavily influenced by Christian, specifically Catholic, beliefs and remain sensitive to the status of motherhood in Christian tradition, although Khoury-Ghata is inclined to take a vitriolic stance against religious institutions and dogma. They are mothers who embrace maternity as a means of reproduction and production, two processes that they perceive as determining the problematic status of women in contemporary societies. Kristeva and Khoury-Ghata have consistently challenged cultural representations of women, particularly that of motherhood. Kristeva has demanded the invention of a new concept of motherhood that defies the sacred/pagan dichotomy in Western culture and Khoury-Ghata has railed against a double standard in Western and Arab societies that allows men to exercise power and enjoy liberties that women are denied. Finally, their explorations of language, identity, and difference, accord a privileged status to poetry as the articulation of a counter-truth, a necessary and radical process that allows for the aesthetic expression of the agony and joy of being human.

#### Poetry and the Maternal: Rooted in Binary Structures of Language

Kristeva and Khoury-Ghata share common ground with regard to their pronounced discussion and configuration of binary structures that represent language and gender. One of the most important aspects of Kristeva's theory, developed in La

Révolution du langage poétique<sup>88</sup>, is the construction of language as a signifying process that begins in the maternal body and involves the interaction of two modalities, the symbolic and the semiotic. Kristeva draws on the authority of Plato's Timaeus, which refers to the receptacle of a “nourishing and maternal” chora, which is “regulated by vocal and gestural organization,” and which serves as the site of the signification process. Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic refers to pre-oedipal functions (oral and anal) and energy discharges, manifested as movement, rhythm, and color, which “connect and orient the [subject’s] body to the mother.”

In contrast, the symbolic component of the signification of language concerns social relations outside the maternal body, defined as the grammar and structure of language organized by the Paternal Law. Both the semiotic and the symbolic are required to process language; however, their conflicting functions produce an ambiguity that is “simultaneously assimilating and destructive,” and places the subject in “a place of permanent scission.” Kristeva’s configuration of the semiotic and the symbolic finds a parallel construction in her establishment of two modalities of expression: the genotext, a process that “constitutes a path between two poles” and the phenotext, identified as the competence and performance affiliated with language structure. The former signifies a dynamic process whereas the latter implies a static position.

As for the manifestation of the semiotic in poetry, Kristeva argues that the nineteenth-century poet Mallarmé evokes the semiotic in “Le Mystère dans les lettres”,

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<sup>88</sup> English translations are taken from the chapter, “Revolution in Poetic Language,” in Kelly Oliver’s The Portable Kristeva.

which he describes as its “rhythms, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation.” Accordingly, using Mallarmé and Lautréamont as her principal models, Kristeva explains that poetic language, represented by paronomasia, onomatopoeia, alliteration, internal rhyme, and meter, disturbs fixed grammatical and syntactic rules. Moreover, as a transgression of the symbolic order, governed by the Paternal Law, poetic language is “profoundly a-theological” and constitutes a violent act in which death plays a part as “the inner boundary of the signifying process.”

My analysis will show that Khoury-Ghata’s poetry evinces similar tensions of ambiguity, produced by contrary modes of expression operating simultaneously. Having labeled herself as a bigamist working in two languages, Khoury-Ghata represents her maternal language, Arabic, as the authentic expression of her illiterate mother. In contrast, French, acquired by Khoury-Ghata in the Lebanese school system, represents the language of her educated father, whom she describes as an avid Francophile as well as a destructive tyrant who terrorizes his family. In addition to identifying each language with one of her parents, Khoury-Ghata insists on the distinctive influence each language exercises on her writing. In interviews, the poet and novelist explicitly associates French with the qualities of structure, authority, restraint, and clarity. Arabic, on the other hand exhibits the characteristics of a hidden libido expressing sensuality, excess, and madness. This dichotomy is reinforced by the fact that French is written from left to right, whereas, Arabic is written from right to left.

The contact between languages echoes Kristeva’s notion of the relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic, identified respectively with the maternal as a

source of pleasure and transgression, on the one hand, and the paternal as the force that sanctions it, on the other. Another ambiguity that is represented in Khoury-Ghata's poetics is the contact between narrative and lyrical voices, with the former evoking the structure of the symbolic and the latter signifying the rupture of the semiotic. In addition, we will see that the content and form of Khoury-Ghata's verse consistently highlight the dynamic role of the maternal figure, whose language and voice – signified by Arabic and oral expression -- inspire the lyrical while her gestures – signified by repetition and circularity -- drive the narrative. Her activity opposes the static and diminished representation of the paternal and other masculine figures. Moreover, in Khoury-Ghata's poetry, the representation of pre-verbal impulses, including the tactile, oral, anal, and olfactory, is pronounced.

As for the structure of her text, evidence of grammatical and syntactic disturbance is represented by repetition, alliteration, and broken syntax. More compelling ruptures are represented by Khoury-Ghata's integration into the text of Arabic letters, which constitute a portrait of otherness. The structural violence of Khoury-Ghata's text is reinforced by its a-theological content, which is sharply critical of the Paternal Law, affiliated with religious dogma. The violence of death is sublimated by the poetic removal of barriers that separate the living from the dead.

### Motherhood and Herethics

Kristeva's attachment to binary structures is also developed in her essay, "Stabat



mater,”<sup>89</sup> which juxtaposes two texts, appearing on each page as two separate columns: the column on the right represents a structured study of the maternal icon, the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, and the column on the left serves as a free-flowing essay about Kristeva’s own experience as a new mother. The elixir of motherhood, milk and tears -- “privileged signs of the Mater Dolorosa,” --functions as “metaphors of non-speech of a ‘semiotics’ that linguistic communication does not account for.” In addition, Kristeva espouses here the idea that “all beliefs and resurrections are rooted in mythologies marked by the strong dominance of a mother goddess.” In this vein, the figure of Mary both expresses desire for the recovery of the masculine corpse of Christ (hanging on the Cross) and the denial of death. This mediating position constitutes the basis of Kristeva’s “hérétique,” which affiliates with maternal love a gesture towards the Other that rehabilitates death through “a-mort.” This ethical stance underscores the link between the subject and the (m)Other as one based on love rather than one based on Paternal Law.

“Desire in Language: Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini” serves as an extension of Kristeva’s discussion of the maternal and the construction of significance based on a system of duality. This essay argues that the artists Leonardo Da Vinci and Giovanni Bellini express two distinct attitudes toward the maternal body that fixed its representation. Observing that the former artist represents the maternal body as a fetish, Kristeva clearly favors Bellini’s more synthetic interpretation of a “unique biographical experience and an uncommon historical intersection of pagan-matriarchal Orientalism

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<sup>89</sup> Oliver’s *The Portable Kristeva* and Moi’s *The Kristeva Reader* provide English translations of excerpts from “Stabat mater,” originally published as “Hérétique de l’amour” in *Tel quel*, 74, Winter, 1977.

with sacred Christianity and incipient humanism.”

Raised by Maronite parents in Lebanon (her father abandoned studies for the priesthood after meeting Khoury-Ghata’s mother), Khoury-Ghata often integrates into her text Christian figures, symbols, and myths. The figure of Mary, sometimes parodied, is among them. Milk and tears are among the precious elements appropriated by the maternal figure in Khoury-Ghata’s oeuvre. My analysis will show that the mother figure in Khoury-Ghata’s universe occupies what Kristeva implies is a mediating position between the terrestrial and the celestial, and that her resemblance to archaic figures, like that of Mary, accords her a mythical stature. Moreover, her role as a medium communicating with the dead and her service as a reconciling force in the community demonstrates the practice of herethics.

### Women’s Time

“Women’s time” is discussed in Les Nouvelles maladies de l’âme<sup>90</sup> and proposes a dual interpretation of time. Linear time corresponds to a cursive history whereas monumental time “incorporates these supranational socio-cultural groupings within even larger entities.” Kristeva argues that women, as generators of the human species, are more closely linked to space than to time, which functions as a measure of history and of a progressive movement towards destruction and death. Again, she evokes Plato, who “referred to the aporia of the chora, a matrix like space that is nourishing, unnamable, prior to the One and to God, and that thus defies metaphysics.” Women’s time is linked

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<sup>90</sup> See the English translation, presented as “Women’s Time,” in Kelly Oliver’s The Portable Kristeva, 349-366.

to “repetition and eternity:”

On the one hand, this measure preserves cycles, gestation, and the eternal return of biological rhythm that is similar to the rhythm of nature [...] a source of resplendent visions and unnamable jouissance. On the other hand, it preserves a solid temporality that is faultless and impenetrable [...]. It also recalls the myths of resurrection in the various traditions that have perpetuated the trace of the maternal cult through its most recent manifestations within Christianity. [...] These two types of temporality – cyclical and monumental – are traditionally associated with female subjectivity, when female subjectivity is considered to be innately maternal (352).

While Kristeva insists on the link between feminine subjectivity and cyclical/monumental time, she nevertheless uses the linear concept of time to categorize two generations of women in the twentieth century. The identity of the first generation of women (pre-1968) is linked to national concerns, whereas the second generation of women, “who have come to feminism since May 1968,” claim a European or trans-European identity. Kristeva further declares, “Today feminism is returning to an archaic (mythic) memory as well as to the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements.” She explains that women feel “rejected from language and the social bond” and their frustration “can eventually lead to a rejection of the symbolic that is experienced as a rejection of the paternal function.” Consequently, they rebel against the “sacrificial contract” imposed by society. Kristeva suggests that women perceive their protest as a resurrection that allows them to propose an alternative society that functions as a “refuge” offering a harmonious, permissive, free, blissful experience.

Khoury-Ghata’s preference for cyclical and monumental expressions of time corresponds to Kristeva’s conception of women’s time. Her poetic strategy evokes the

quest of the second generation of women, described by Kristeva as those who seek recourse in the archaic memory of myth. It also adheres closely to Kristeva's notion of ambivalence expressed by the constant rejection of and incorporation into the symbolic order. However, the promise of a counter-society of harmony and bliss is rarely glimpsed in Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre, perhaps because of what I propose is her unwavering vision of a traditional Lebanese society, in which a woman's aspirations remain subordinate to the collective's well-being, and a prosperous and harmonious society remains frustratingly illusive.

### Melancholy

Kristeva's Soleil Noir, which addresses the expression of melancholy evoked by the Freudian theory of mourning for the maternal object, distinguishes two manifestations of the melancholic imagination. One is represented as an act of war in which the maternal figure, as the target of hostility and violence, becomes the object of destruction. The other, defined by sadness, seeks to merge with the (lost) maternal figure. Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre, much of which resembles a vast elegy, accentuates the latter.

Kristeva describes some of the characteristics of melancholic writing as follows: "A repetitive rhythm and a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequences, changes them into recurring, obsessive litanies."<sup>91</sup> While my analysis will not describe Khoury-Ghata's writing as monotonous, it will show that her verse is replete with repetitive sounds, words, and expressions evoking "obsessive litanies." Kristeva

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<sup>91</sup> See Leon S. Roudiez's English translation, Black Sun. 33.

also insists on the melancholic writer's tendency to "[deprive] the father of phallic power, now attributed to the mother." The "paternal signifier" is "disowned, weakened, ambiguous, devalorized" (45-47). The devalued status of the paternal figure is very much in evidence in Khoury-Ghata's text that minimizes, reviles, and mocks the paternal figure. In contrast, the maternal figure is given a prominent role as a model of reconciliation and self-renunciation.

Kristeva argues that the melancholic subject uses writing as a strategy for survival that insures the author's rebirth or resurrection. This strategy of survival involves a quest to recover the signification of language, represented by the "lost" mother tongue: "melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue. They have lost the meaning – the value– of their mother tongue for want of losing the mother" (53). The writer's response (strategy) is to strive for omnipotence via semiotic means, represented by primary processes: gestural, motor, vocal, olfactory, tactile, and auditory. Poetic language provides melancholic writers with "an inaccessible ascendancy over an archaic object that thus remains, for themselves, and all others, an enigma and a secret" (64).

Resurrection, which evokes one of the most renowned Christian myths, represents a major trope in Khoury-Ghata oeuvre, which is darkened by melancholia. Employing surrealist/magical realist strategies that ignore the barriers between the living and the dead, she portrays the re-animation of her deceased mother, brother, other family members, as well as the victims of violence in Lebanon. Using enigmatic numbers and symbols, associated with numerology, and other superstitions, she retrieves from archaic origins her mother tongue, as well as other lost figures and traditions.

## Negativity

Kristeva explains that in the signification of language the subject is “both generated and negated” in the semiotic chora: “We call this process of changes and stases a negativity to distinguish it from negation, which is the act of a judging subject.”<sup>92</sup> The dialectical relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic produces an ambiguity that Kristeva describes as “both divided and unitary. Repetitive rejection prevents the stasis of One meaning, One myth, One logic” (75). The symbolic function is “dissociated from all pleasures, made to oppose it,” whereas the semiotic drives, arising from the desire to reconcile with the maternal figure, are given full reign in the context of oralization, which no longer expresses a “hollow and vaginated, expelling and rejecting body” but rather a “vocatic one,” represented by the throat, voice, and breasts” (79). The symbol of negation “arranges the repressed element in a different way, one that does not represent an intellectual acceptance of the repressed.” With regard to tropes of rejection in poetic texts, representations of expectoration in Artaud and excretion in Bataille serve as examples. Developing the concept of negativity, Powers of Horror (1980) describes the subject as undergoing a narcissistic crisis and experiencing a violence of mourning for an “object” already lost. This crisis engenders a “perversion of language” in which dichotomous values, such as pure and impure, prohibition and sin, change places. In Khoury-Ghata’s text, this inversion of values is also represented by the establishment of a maternal authority, linked to natural forces, which supplants a paternal one, linked to

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<sup>92</sup> The Portable Kristeva’s English translation of Kristeva’s discussion of the negative, p. 37.

dogmatic institutions.

This study will demonstrate how Kristeva's notions of negativity and rejection can be applied to the analysis of Khoury-Ghata's poetry. Not only do the maternal voice and gestures dominate the landscape at the expense of the paternal figure, the abject (anal and oral, in particular) represents a recurring trope. In addition, Khoury-Ghata's text adopts the form of a linear narrative whose progress is constantly challenged by subversive structures represented by repetition, reversal, inversion of logic, and the pronounced use of negative grammatical structures.

#### Kristeva and Bonnefoy: the Maternal Function

Lastly, with regard to the theory of poetic language, Carrie Jaurès Noland's article, "Yves Bonnefoy and Julia Kristeva: The Poetics of Motherhood," "brings together under the sign of the maternal" Kristeva and the celebrated contemporary poet Yves Bonnefoy, whose approach to literature, represented by his affiliation with the poetry review L'Ephémère, opposes the post-structuralist stance of Kristeva and her peers at Tel quel. Noland's interview with Bonnefoy underscores his association of poetic language with the maternal function: "C'est la mère qui donne la parole. Il y a une carence de cette parole dans la modernité parce qu'il n'y a plus de sacré. C'est la terre même qui se tait. Il ne nous reste qu'une signification non-racinée."<sup>93</sup>

Noland observes that both Kristeva and Bonnefoy associate the mother "with the earth, the rhythms of the physical body, and the experience of the sacred" as well as with

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<sup>93</sup> Carrie Jaurès Noland, "Yves Bonnefoy and Julia Kristeva: The Poetics of Motherhood," French literature series, Volume 18 (1) (1991): 135. Her interview with Bonnefoy took place in 1989.

“a prior state, a ‘before,’ in which the self is not yet constituted by language.” She also indicates that Bonnefoy pays homage to the maternal origins of language in his essay, “Une écriture de notre temps,” which examines the maternal figure in the writing of Louis René-des-Forêts: “[...] celle qui sait l’origine, celle qui, le lui demanderait-on, blessé, pourrait peut-être la rendre— qui sait même, celle qui, au moment d’enseigner les mots mais effrayée parmi eux, aurait préféré retenir [l’enfant] dans la nuit de l’Etre (...)”<sup>94</sup>. In this context, according to Noland, the mother serves as a “cognitive and sensual” source of language, which Bonnefoy represents in his own poetry as “the vibration of the maternal voice.” I am not suggesting here that Bonnefoy is the only contemporary poet whose poetics share common ground with Kristeva’s theory; however, Noland’s article presents a convincing and explicit link between Kristeva’s theory and the verse of a renowned contemporary French poet, and thus provides more impetus to the idea of exploring the resonance of Kristeva’s theory in the poetics of Khoury-Ghata.

#### Myth and the Maternal in Gilbert Durand’s Nocturnal Order

At this juncture, I turn to address the ideas of another great thinker, Gilbert Durand (b. 1921), whose study, Les Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire (1960), has been critical to my analysis of Khoury-Ghata’s oeuvre. Durand is professor emeritus of cultural anthropology and sociology at the University of Grenoble, and co-founder of the "Centre de Recherche de l’Imaginaire." Considered a disciple of the philosopher

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<sup>94</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, “Une écriture de notre temps,” La Verité de la parole, Paris: Mercure de France, 1988) 234.



Gaston Bachelard, he is renowned for his reflections on the pervasive presence of mythical figures, symbols, and archetypes in the human imagination. "In the aforementioned study, he explains his broad notion of myth:

Nous entendons par mythe un système dynamique de symboles, d'archétypes, et de schèmes, système dynamique qui, sous l'impulsion d'un schème, tend à se composer en récit. Le mythe est déjà une esquisse de rationalisation puisqu'il utilise le fil du discours, dans lequel les symboles se résolvent en mots et les archétypes en idées. Le mythe explicite un schème ou un groupe de schèmes. De même que l'archétype promouvait l'idée et que le symbole engendrait le nom, on peut dire que le mythe promeut la doctrine religieuse, le système philosophique, ou, comme l'a bien vu Bréhier, le récit historique et légendaire (64).

Like Kristeva, Durand supports his position with Plato's wisdom:

C'est ce qu'enseigne d'une façon éclatante l'oeuvre de Platon dans laquelle la pensée rationnelle semble constamment s'éveiller d'un rêve mythique et quelquefois le regretter. Nous constaterons d'ailleurs que l'organisation dynamique du mythe correspond souvent à l'organisation statique que nous avons nommée 'constellation d'images'. La méthode de convergence met en évidence le même isomorphisme dans la constellation et dans le mythe (64-65).

Durand's juxtaposition of the dynamic and static dimensions of myth represents but one of the binary structures of myth that he develops. In Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire, he proposes to organize a structure of the human imaginary according to a topology of images, which are represented in myth and illustrate how man envisages time and space as a response to his finiteness. Drawing upon the Russian Bechterev's concepts of reflexology and Jung's notions of archetype and the collective, Durand synthesizes a vast range of research from diverse scientific disciplines.

In the preface to the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of his study, dated 1992, Durand alludes to his work as the product of "l'aménagement des rives" navigating the movements of symbolism, surrealism, the "Nouvel Esprit Scientifique," Bachelard, Freud, and influential works of Levi-Strauss, Paul Ricoeur, Henry Corbin, and Mircea Eliade, among others.

Durand establishes a binary system that juxtaposes two poles of the imaginary, identified as a "régime diurne" and a "régime nocturne."<sup>95</sup> The former governs one set of structures identified as "schizomorphes (ou Héroïques)." The latter is further organized into two sets of structures labeled "synthétiques (ou Dramatiques)" and "mystiques (ou Antiphrasiques)." Each structure set is characterized by attributes that distinguish it from the others, so that it remains defined by a particular logic, dominant reflexes, verbal patterns ("schèmes verbaux"), archetypes, symbols, and themes. Durand goes so far as to assign a specific tarot card to each set of structures, i.e. "la coupe" is affiliated with "mystiques" whereas "le glaive" and "le sceptre" correspond to "schizomorphes."

I became familiar with Durand's work while studying the contemporary French novelist Sylvie Germain's Le Livre des nuits, whose very title evokes an encounter with the nocturnal. Durand's organization of the "régime nocturne" provided me with an accessible framework for the analysis of Germain's haunting images in the context of her tragic family saga. When I first began reading Khoury-Ghata's poems and novels, many of which recount the somber history of her family and Lebanon, I was immediately struck by the similarities between her poetics and Durand's conception of the nocturnal. Titles of Khoury-Ghata's collections of poetry, Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits and Les

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<sup>95</sup> A chart of the "régimes" and their characteristics is available in Annexe II. 506-507.

Obscuris, are emblematic of the nocturnal in her verse. This examination will use the framework of Durand's mystical and synthetic structures to show how Khoury-Ghata's poetics construct a nocturnal universe where the maternal figure dominates the landscape.

Durand's mystical configuration is identified by specific structures that manifest themselves in the imaginary: redoubling and perseverance, adhesion, realism of the senses, and miniaturization. Its logic is governed by the antiphrasis and the principles of analogy and similitude. The dominant reflex is digestive with its tactile, olfactory, and oral drives. The key verbal pattern is linked to the infinitive verb "confondre" with the subordinate verbs "descendre," "posséder," and "pénétrer." Attributes are defined by the adjectives: "profond," "calme," "chaud," "intime," and "caché." As mentioned earlier, the mystical is affiliated with the tarot sign of the cup. As for archetypes and symbols, there are many. My study will highlight the following: "la nuit, la mère, la demeure, la femme," and "la nourriture," as well as symbols and themes of "le ventre, Osiris, le voile, le chaudron, la tombe," and "le lait."

As for the synthetic configuration, structures are defined by interpretations of history and the logic of a diachronic representation of time, which emphasizes the principle of causality. The dominant reflex is copulative, which stresses rhythmic drives. Verbal patterns are represented by the verb "relier" with subordinate verbs "mûrir," "progresser" on the one hand, and "revenir," "recenser" on the other. Attributes are temporal: "en avant, avenir, arrière, passé." The tarot signs are "le bâton" and "le denier." Some archetypes include: "le fils, l'arbre, la roue, la croix," and "la lune." Symbols and themes include "l'arithmologie, la triade, la tétrade, le messie," and "le

sacrifice."<sup>96</sup>

Certain elements of Durand's concept recall aspects of Kristeva's theory of poetic language. Firstly, Kristeva also values the role of the imaginary, which she describes in the context of aesthetic practices as what "enables us to envision an ethics aware of its own sacrificial order." Secondly, the theories of both thinkers are based on gender-determined binary configurations. Durand assigns to the diurnal order a masculine warrior-like identity and to its opposition, the nocturnal order, a feminine and maternal identity, whose subversive function recalls Kristeva's notions of rejection and negation in the signification process. In this manner, Durand's dichotomous structures resemble Kristeva's symbolic and semiotic modalities.<sup>97</sup> Both Kristeva and Durand support their theories with the works of French poets who plumb the depths of the nocturnal. For example, Kristeva analyzes Mallarmé and Lautréamont in La Révolution du langage poétique and Nerval in Soleil noir, while Durand discusses in his study the works of Nerval, as well as various symbolists and surrealists. Kristeva assigns poets, as well as novelists and artists, a privileged place in the process of language signification. Durand,

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<sup>96</sup> The schizomorphic configuration represents values that oppose those of the mystical and synthetic structures. Its structures express a heroic vision, supported by idealization, as well as geometry, symmetry, and gigantism. Its logic is based on the antithesis and the principles of exclusion and contradiction. The dominant reflex is postural, with an emphasis on the manual function, vision, and hearing. Verbal patterns and attributes are represented by the antonyms "séparer/mêler, monter/chuter, pur/souillé, and, clair/sombre." The tarot signs are the sword and the scepter. Some archetypes, symbols, and themes, include antonyms as well: "lumière/ténèbres, héros/monstre, soleil, armes, échelle, and clocher."

<sup>97</sup> Durand redresses his static approach in his preface to the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of his work, by pointing out that, in fact, he had proposed a ternary position that transcended the dichotomous diurnal/nocturnal system; however, he did not sufficiently develop the idea in his study.

too, esteems poetry, “[...] la poésie comme le mythe est inaliénable.”<sup>98</sup> For the purposes of my thesis, it is particularly significant that Durand, like Kristeva, underscores the role of the maternal figure in the nocturnal order, although his conception, in the context of myth, allows for a more threatening representation.

De même les Grandes Déesses qui, dans ces constellations, vont remplacer le Grand Souverain mâle et unique de l’imagination religieuse de la transcendance, seront à la fois bénéfiques, protectrices du foyer, donneuses de la maternité, mais au besoin elles conservent une séquelle de la féminité redoutable et sont en même temps déesses terribles, belliqueuses et sanguinaires (226).

In the context of Durand’s mystical structures, the archetype of the mother, affiliated with the symbols of "le ventre" and "la tombe," as well as the logic of the antiphrasis, evoke respectively Kristeva’s maternal chora, the herethics of “a-mort”, and the negativity of semiotic signification. Moreover, the digestive and copulative reflexes of the nocturnal order, associated respectively with the mystical and synthetic structures, mirror the oral, anal, and rhythmic drives that express the semiotic. Both Durand and Kristeva imply that the desire for a return to the maternal origins also serves as a platform for rebirth/resurrection. Finally, it is the maternal figure that plays the role of mediator, whether bridging the semiotic and symbolic, or reconciling life and death. In this regard, the maternal figure practices an ethics of bridging opposing forces. These correspondences between the theories of Durand and Kristeva will contribute to our understanding of the manner in which Khoury-Ghata's poetic expression of the re-

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<sup>98</sup> Conclusion, p. 496.

appropriation of her maternal language, culture, and history, devises a return to origins, and a revitalization of personal and collective identities.

### Mythocritique/Mythopoétique

Numerous readings of other contemporary French scholars, many of whom are the "héritiers" of Durand's research, inform my approach to myth in the context of Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre. Pierre Brunel, a renowned professor and critic of French and comparative literature, has produced valuable critical studies of myth, including the now classic Mythocritique. Théorie et parcours, which proposes a method for the study of myth. His assertion that the potential of the mythical element in literature lies in its ability to "irradiate" refers to myth's power to transcend a given time and place.

Brunel's taking into account the diverse perspectives of twentieth-century scholars reveals that the dual nature of myth and its ontological function is fundamental. For instance, according to André Jolles, myth reveals "la constance" and "la multiplicité" of the universe, and furthermore, arises from the dialectic of question and response. As for Gilbert Durand, he conceives the structure of myth as "un système de forces antagonistes." In contrast, Mircea Eliade insists on the function of myth as a sacred narrative of "le temps fabuleux des 'commencements.'"

Maintaining a keen interest in the representation of myth in modern and contemporary culture, Brunel affirms that "rien n'est moins fixe que le mythe" (80). A partisan of myth's plasticity, he supports the idea that every writer should be granted what he describes as "le droit à la modulation," insisting that: "Le devoir du poète est de

se faire entendre sur les autres [voix] comme Orphée triompha des femmes-oiseaux dans les argonautiques d'Apollonios de Rhodes" (80).

Brunel's editing of various dictionaries, including the massive tomes, Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires and Dictionnaire des mythes féminins, has contributed to the expanding frontiers of mythical studies and encouraged the examination of myth in the context of diverse cultures and disciplines. The former dictionary provides a treasure trove of essays addressing mythical narratives, figures, and general expressions affiliated with myth. More importantly, its definition of the mythico-poetic is critical to the thrust of my thesis, which proposes to examine the underlying components and objectives of Khoury-Ghata's mythico-poetic mission. The mythico-poetic attitude is identified as a position:

that gives the creator of a work of art the sense of revealing the ineffable, the secret, of transcending the human condition, and of returning to a primal language. In this language, the way in which the words, sounds or colours are put together seems to establish an order that is both closed and open, particular and universal, located in and outside time. In short, it is 'poetic', but also 'mythical': it is a rallying point, a place for interpersonal communication, a permanent meeting place for individuals and for groups of people.<sup>99</sup>

Having discussed "mythopoétique" in the context of scholarship by Brunel and other specialists, Véronique Gély's essay, "Pour une mythopoétique: quelques propositions sur les rapports entre mythe et fiction," re-examines the notion:

Ce que je propose ici d'appeler mythopoétique, en empruntant donc à mon

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<sup>99</sup> Max Bilen, "The Mythico-Poetic Attitude," Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes, and Archetypes (London and New York: Routledge. 1996) 862.

tour un mot forgé par d'autres, concerne le geste créateur (la poiesis) – à la fois “invention” et “travail” – non seulement des oeuvres, mais aussi des mythes eux-mêmes (...) Une mythopoétique ne postulerait, quant à elle, ni antériorité, ni extériorité des mythes par rapport à la littérature. Elle s'attacherait en revanche à examiner comment les oeuvres “font” les mythes et comment les mythes “font” l'oeuvre. (7)

Gély does not so much offer a new interpretation of the mythico-poetic, as she summons the dual functions of the critical writer, and underscores the reciprocity that defines the relationship between myth and literature. Gély's exploration of gender in another essay “Les Sexes de la mythologie. Mythes, littérature et gender” suggests that critics should not seek in myth the comfort of fixed values; rather, myth should be examined as a dynamic form that expresses otherness, difference, and scandal. In this vein, Gély, who has produced critical studies on the mythical figures of "Echo" and "Philomèle," insists on contemporary interpretations of long-neglected female figures in myths from Antiquity. Supporting this endeavor, Sylvie Ballestra-Puech's lengthy studies trace the myths of "les Parques" and "Arachné" from Antiquity to the present and reveal the significance of the metaphor of weaving as a symbol of the collective. The activity of weaving evokes the working feminine figure whose efforts bind the community together.

Drawing on Gély's dual notion of “invention” and “travail,” my study will also examine Khoury-Ghata's poetry in the context of the former's definition of the mythico-poetic in as much as the poet's writing integrates mythical elements/fragments, primarily of Greek, Arab, and Christian origins, to generate her own biomythography in which personal and collective narratives intertwine. Her representation of figures and themes



that resemble the mythical figures and narratives such as those found in "les Parques" and "Arachné," who evoke otherness and scandal, contributes to a French literary tradition of the appropriation of myth represented by women writers from Christine de Pisan to Monique Wittig.

Brunel's Dictionnaire des mythes féminins, which represents a groundbreaking effort on the part of numerous scholars to define and classify the feminine in myth, serves as another major reference in my analysis of the feminine figure in Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre. As the back cover of the book explains, "La femme exerce une fascination qui, depuis la plus haute antiquité, a suscité des mythes nombreux et variés, inquiétants ou rassurants, presque toujours séduisants." Its preface suggests the privileged role of verse: "Sans doute, encore aujourd'hui, la littérature et en particulier la poésie peuvent-elles redonner une certaine vie à des figures qui passent pour obsolètes." Given Khoury-Ghata's affiliation with surrealism and her representation of the female figure, the definition of the "surréaliste (femme)" is essential to my study. In the context of the surrealist quest of a modern mythology, the definition introduces a citation from Aragon, one of Khoury-Ghata's declared favorite writers. In Le Paysan de Paris, he writes, "Des mythes nouveaux naissent sous chacun de nos pas. Là où l'homme a vécu commence la légende, là où il vit (...) Une mythologie nouvelle se noue et se dénoue" (1768).

The definition of the surrealist woman goes on to describe her as possessing extraordinary powers that serve collective and subversive functions. She gives access to the world and its "merveilles" and serves as a "pourvoyeuse d'énigmes." She effaces temporal and spatial barriers. As the point of convergence between forces, "elle

réconcilie la Nature et la Personnes, l'objectif et le subjectif, Nature et l'Esprit.”

Representing a multitude of feminine figures, she engenders “un mythe nouveau et unificateur qui conjugue les paradoxes et les transcende” (1769-1774). The feminine figures in Khoury-Ghata's poetry incarnate to a great extent this surrealist model; however, as my study will demonstrate, they do not evoke the same promise of jouissance affiliated with many surrealist representations, such as the aforementioned definition, inspired principally by masculine representations. My study will also refer to other definitions of archetypal figures, such as "Grande Déesse," "Mère," and "Nuit," as well as celebrated mythical figures, such as "Ishtar," "Isis," "Eurydice," and "Mélusine."

Finally, I have benefited from a collection of essays entitled Questions de Mythocritique (2005), edited by Danièle Chauvin, André Siganos, and Philippe Walters, which acknowledges the debt that critics of myth owe to Brunel and Durand, and furthermore proposes to take stock of “the most contemporary reflections” on and about "mythocritique," whose objective is to “[study] myths in literature.” The preface explains that the editors aim to represent a multi-disciplinary approach that avoids excessive “helléno-centrisme.” It also informs readers that the rubrics of their collected essays tend to represent dual notions, be it two terms, two critical positions, two genres, or two methodological domains. Once again, the binary structure is thus evoked as the principal organizing component of myth.

Among the thirty one essays, the following contribute to this study: Daniel Madelénat's “Biographie et mythe,” Philippe Walter's “Conte, légende et mythe,” Jean-Marc Moura's “Imagologie littéraire et mythe,” Stanislaw Jasionowicz's “Archétype”,

and Danièle Chauvin's "Mémoire et mythe." Ironically, the essay that promises to address the heart of my dissertation "Poésie et mythe," by Colette Astier, suggests that the two forms represent irreconcilable opposing modalities in as much as myth is defined as a narrative and poetry functions as an expression of sentiment. Collectively, the interrogations and reflections of these selected essays have contributed to the development of my proposition of Khoury-Ghata's poetry as a mosaic of mythical fragments that compose archetype, folktale, fable, memoir, and autobiography.

The theories reviewed in this chapter specifically address two principal dimensions that shape my examination of Khoury-Ghata's poetics, namely, the myth and the maternal. I have demonstrated that these two concepts are highlighted in the discourses of Julia Kristeva and Gilbert Durand, who respectively propose binary gender-based systems of the signification of language and the imaginary. In addition, both Kristeva and Durand assign the maternal figure a critical role as the source of a dark (re)productive power that functions as a mediator between contrary forces. The notion of the mythical feminine figure as a subversive agent, who both challenges and supports the collective, is reinforced by the scholarship of Brunel, Véronique Gély and Sylvie Ballestra-Puesch. The work of other contemporary scholars identifies myth as a protean and flexible structure that accommodates diverse literary forms. Given this broad framework, the following examination will look at specific examples of Khoury-Ghata's verse and prose, which demonstrate how the convergence of myth and the maternal generates a lyrical narrative radiating both the personal and the universal.

## Chapter 4

### Franco-Arabic Encounters: Binary Structures of Language in Poetry and in the Novel

#### Introduction

Language is a critical issue for Khoury-Ghata, whose maternal tongue is Arabic. Her father was a Francophile and she studied French in the Lebanese school system, marked particularly by the French Mandate.<sup>100</sup> Following the example of many 20th century Lebanese writers, including the poets Georges Schehadé (1907-1989), Nadia Tuéni (1935-1983), and Salah Stétié (1929-), Khoury-Ghata chose to write in French, rather than in Arabic. She often compares her relationship with two languages to a marriage, and further describes herself as a “bigamist,” who has led “a double life,” and “lusted after two identities and two ways of writing.”<sup>101</sup>

Establishing a clear distinction between the respective characteristics of Arabic and French, Khoury-Ghata insists that whereas the former “apporte son souffle, ses odeurs, sa saveur, sa forme et sa générosité,” the latter “apporte sa sagesse” and “me sert de garde-fou contre les excès et les dérapages” (Stout 308). As my introduction noted, she alludes to the tensions involved in negotiating two languages: “Les années venues j’ai conclu un armistice avec la langue française et décidé de la réunir dans un même moule avec mon arabe maternel” (Stout 308). In spite of espousing what appears to be an

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<sup>100</sup> France administered Syria and Lebanon under the Mandate of the League of Nations, 1920-1943.

<sup>101</sup> Khoury-Ghata explains her position in “Pourquoi j’écris en Français”, Women in French Studies 9.1 (2001): 18-21. American poet Marilyn Hacker's English translation, “Why I write in French,” concludes the collection of translated verse entitled She says, which features the lengthy sequence of “Les mots,” from Compassion des pierres.

essentialist position, Khoury-Ghata expresses her determination to fuse the two languages and often employs cooking metaphors to describe her strategy of mixing, melting, and molding. Emphasizing her sensual manipulation of both languages, she declares with a flourish: "Je gave la langue française de loukoum, je lui apprend à faire la danse du ventre" (Khoury-Ghata 19). Khoury-Ghata's association of her mother tongue, Arabic, with "oralité," and distinctively feminine and erotic rhythmic gestures evokes the pre-oedipal drives that generate the semiotic of Kristeva's construction of language signification. In this manner, the poet mitigates the control and order affiliated with the French language evocative of Kristeva's symbolic modality.

This chapter will examine how Khoury-Ghata represents her maternal language, Arabic, in two distinctive ways, one in poetry and the other in a novel. Her celebration of her Arab Lebanese heritage and the origins of language is revealed in the poetry of Anthologie personnelle and Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits, both of which depict a childlike wonder of language and the legacy of French and Christian myths. Verses in "Les mots" in the collection Compassion des pierres serve as a particularly compelling example of how Khoury-Ghata incorporates the alphabet of her maternal language into verse, because it uses the narrative framework of cosmogonic myth to link the origins of her identity to the genesis of language. In addition, the poet's manipulation of letters of the alphabet reflects poetic traditions represented by the nineteenth century French poet Rimbaud as well as the contemporary Arab poet Adonis. Moreover, the representation of Arabic in "Les mots" serves as a context for the study of Kristeva's conception of the maternal and the semiotic, as well as Durand's notion of the mystical and synthetic

structures of the nocturnal order.

In contrast, Khoury-Ghata's novel Sept pierres pour la femme adultère (2007) proposes a much different portrayal of the Arabic language in the context of a novel. While Khoury-Ghata's poetry expresses nostalgia for the lost language and culture of a Lebanese village, this novel's integration of Arabic words and expressions supports the author's critique of misogynic practices in a fictionalized rural Muslim village. It also highlights Khoury-Ghata's self-reflective articulation of her mediating role as a translator of the Arabic language and interpreter of Arab culture for Francophone readers.

The examination of these two distinctive representations of Arabic in the French text will draw primarily on Brunel's Mythocritique and Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires, The Empire Writes Back (Ed., Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin), Samia Mehrez's "Translation and the Postcolonial Experience: the Francophone North African Text" in Rethinking Translation<sup>102</sup>, and Jean-Marc Moura's "Imagologie littéraire et myth" in Questions de Mythocritique (205-215).

This chapter will first examine Khoury-Ghata's bilingual and bicultural poetry in the context of the "bipolar structure" of myth, a "system of antagonistic forces," identified in Pierre Brunel's Mythocritique (65-66). My analysis of the approximately 300 verse sequence, entitled "Les mots" in her collection Compassion des pierres (2001), will demonstrate how the poet uses "bipolar structure" and "antagonistic forces" to articulate her dual French and Lebanese identity by integrating into her verse alternating

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<sup>102</sup> Samia Mehrez, "Translation and the Postcolonial Experience: the Francophone North African Text," Rethinking Translation, ed., Lawrence Venuti (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 120-138.

sequences of Roman and Arabic letters. This allows Khoury-Ghata, in her mythic-poetic state, to both exploit and bridge the differences between these two value systems, while effectively inscribing her Lebanese origins and mother tongue at the center of her mythical narrative, thus linking her own identity to the genesis of language. In this manner, "Les mots" invites a comparison with Kristeva's construction of poetic language generated by the interplay between semiotic and symbolic modalities. Furthermore, it expresses numerous aspects of mystical and synthetic themes and archetypes, as well as symbols, found in Durand's nocturnal order, in which the maternal plays a prominent role.

#### Preliminary Notes on Language and Alphabet in Khoury-Ghata's Poetry

To appreciate the singularity of the verses in "Les mots," it is useful to take a look at the representation of language and alphabet in verses from other collections in Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre. While nearly all of Khoury-Ghata's novels are set in the Mediterranean Orient, it was not until the late 1990s, after two decades of publishing in France, that the poet's passion for her maternal language and her obsession with the Arabic alphabet began to surface as a major theme in her poetry. This could be attributed to the death of her mother, to whom she dedicated her autobiographical novel Une maison au bord des larmes (1998).

The poet clearly traces the origins of language to her mother's village, Bcharré, in north Lebanon, where she and her siblings spent part of their childhood. The sequence of 46 poems, entitled "Basse Enfance" in Anthologie personnelle (1997), represent a child's

discovery of the power of language and the alphabet as a force to be reckoned with.

Children imagine themselves emerging "du côté sombre de la terre de l'envers de l'alphabet". In a familiar playful gesture, children used to squint "pour avoir grimacé face à l'alphabet". The siblings' relationship with letters is distinctly physical and intimate: "Nous étions à l'étroit entre A et Z."

"Sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse," a sequence of 19 poems in the collection Elle dit (1999), depicts language as the articulation of the extraordinary and the whimsical. For example, the village crow caws in Aramaic, an ancient Semitic language, and the schoolmaster proposes to test the first letter of the Arabic alphabet on himself before using it on the children: "The letter Aleph is unreliable / its back is so fragile not even a hair could ride on it." Another learned man of the village admires the alphabet's celestial and terrestrial beauty in the twinkling of stars "which look like cumin seeds."

"Orties," an autobiographical narrative in verse in the collection Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits (2004), highlights the plurilingual status of the Lebanese village community. The poet recalls that in school, three languages were taught: "Le grec parce que tout vient de là / l'araméen à cause du Christ / le français pour venger Jeanne d'Arc / et Vercingétorix". In fact, Greek, Aramaic, and French constitute three linguistic pillars of the Maronite Catholic community in Lebanon. These verses pay tribute to the poet's Lebanese Maronite identity while explaining, from a child's point of view, the logic underpinning the village school's pedagogy. Language is thus linked to French and Maronite history and mythology.



The plasticity and tangibility of language are especially critical to Khoury-Ghata's representation. In the same collection of verse, spoken Aramaic is described as "caillouteux," while Arabic is compared to "billes de verre dans nos poches d'enfants". The mineral qualities of these two languages suggest their distinctive sonorous and visual characteristics as well as their common capacity to endure. In contrast, alphabets are swept up like "crottes de chèvre," thus representing an amusing, if abject, organic product. More sensually pleasing are "les cerises de l'alphabet / les bonbons acidulés de la grammaire" that evoke the simple pleasures of childhood. The narrator addresses passersby in Lebanese dialect "âpre comme fruit de jujubier," which recalls the harsh tones of speech. The construction of language as an expression characterized by Semitic roots, driven by pre-verbal reflexes (oral and anal), and shaped by elementary forms, will resonate in the following examination of "Les mots."

#### Analysis of "Les mots" as a Myth of Origins

Khoury-Ghata's manipulation of two starkly different languages that compose her identity propels the poetry of "Les mots" ("Words"), the first of two long sequences in Compassion des pierres.<sup>103</sup> "Les mots" tells the story of the genesis of language in the framework of a cosmogonic myth. Cosmogonic myth has a long and illustrious history in French poetry. From Ronsard and Du Bartas in the 16th and 17th centuries, to Claudel and Supervielle in the 20th century, French poets have been inspired to express the

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<sup>103</sup> The second and final sequence of poems in Compassion des pierres is entitled "Miroir transis."

origins of the universe. Khoury-Ghata aligns herself with those celebrated poets who have undertaken what is perceived as a noble and sacred poetic mission.

Khoury-Ghata's appropriation of myth serves multiple objectives. Reviewing Max Bilen's definition of the mythico-poetic in Brunel's Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes, and Archetypes, Khoury-Ghata's assumption of the mythico-poetic attitude grants her:

the sense of revealing the ineffable, the secret, of transcending the human condition, and of returning to a primal language. In this language, the way in which the words, sounds or colours are put together seems to establish an order that is both closed and open, particular and universal, located in and outside time. In short, it is 'poetic', but also 'mythical': it is a rallying point, a place for interpersonal communication, a permanent meeting place for individuals and for groups of people.<sup>104</sup>

Since one of myth's foremost functions is to explain,<sup>105</sup> Khoury-Ghata uses it as a pedagogical tool to impart knowledge about the origins of language in the context of her own Arab Lebanese origins and maternal language. In this regard, she incorporates into "Les mots" universal and particular references, including archetypes, biblical figures, Lebanese proverbs, and folklore. Archetypes in "Les mots" are designated by the prototypes: "premier mot," "premier chiffre," "premier arbre," and "premier chasseur." The juxtaposition of the "first rooster" and the "first hen" in the following couplet evokes Durand's typology of images, whose binary system identifies the moon with the female gender and the sun with the male gender: "Soleil était le nom du premier coq / Lune

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<sup>104</sup> Companion to Literary Heroes, Archetypes, and Myths, ed., Pierre Brunel. 862.

<sup>105</sup> According to Brunel's preface, the principle functions of myth are to narrate, explain, and reveal.

celui de la première poule" (16). Moreover, the parallel construction of the words sun and moon serves as an oblique reference to an Arabic grammar rule, whose classification of "sun" and "moon" letters determines the pronunciation of a noun when it is preceded by the definite article.<sup>106</sup>

Evocations of Old Testament figures from the book of Genesis, such as Adam and Eve: "nus étaient ceux chassés du paradis parce qu'ils manquèrent de pudeur" (18) and Noah: "il suffit d'essorer un nuage de travers pour que Noé écrive / des deux mains" (23) allude to the sacred Christian origins of Khoury-Ghata's cosmogonic myth as well as the religious and cultural heritage shared by France and Lebanon. The inclusion of Arab proverbs and folklore honor Lebanese oral tradition and superstitions: "Trois bougies alignées annoncent une dispute" / "Quatre cierges autour d'une couche appellent la mort" (15). These verses also allude to the practice of communicating with the dead.

As for the essential role of the feminine figure in the creation narrative, the portrayal of a village bride represents her as an agent of reproduction: on affûtait la mariée pour l'introduire dans le sommeil de l'homme / l'enfant né de leur accouplement avait des mains de laine en / prévision de la neige à venir" (25)

"Les mots" also pays tribute to the poet's Lebanese roots by representing the emergence of the Phoenician alphabet from the waters of the ancient kingdom of Tyr,<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Nouns beginning with "sun" letters require the suppression of the consonant sound "l" of the definite article "al" that precedes them.

<sup>107</sup> The ancient Phoenician word for Tyr translates as "rock." Tyr was originally established on a rocky island close to the mainland. Evoked by the title, *Compassion des pierres*, the theme of mineral is critical to the poet's representation of language. At the beginning of "Les mots," words are represented as 'cailloux' (pebbles).

which remains an important port city in Lebanon today. Contemporary historians consider Phoenician letters the mother alphabet of numerous languages, including Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Cyrillic.<sup>108</sup>

In addition, Khoury-Ghata inserts into these verses letters of the Arabic alphabet, encouraging the Francophone reader to extend his/her horizon of knowledge beyond the familiar Roman letters. Overseeing this initiation, Khoury-Ghata presents herself as a kind of modern Cadmos, the son of the King of Tyr who, according to legend, introduced the Phoenician alphabet to the Greeks. She not only assumes the role of telling the myth of language, but also perpetuates the ancient tradition of conveying a new language from one part of the world to another. The Phoenician origins of Lebanon were particularly dear to early twentieth-century Christian Lebanese poets, such as Charles Corm, who spearheaded a movement espousing "Libanisme phénicien" with the objective of challenging Ottoman rule and promoting a Lebanese identity that pre-dated Islam (Darwiche Jabbour 93). As we observed in Chapter 2, the subsequent generation of Lebanese poets, such as Sa'id 'Aql who wrote a play about Cadmus, engaged in promoting a Lebanese identity that transcended religious differences.

In the context of the "bipolar structure" of myth, antithetical pairs, like that of the aforementioned sun and moon, rooster and hen, are constant motifs in "Les mots." Many of them are employed to describe words or letters, which are personified as whimsical figures. For instance, consonants and vowels are compared in the context of their

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<sup>108</sup> The history of the Phoenician kingdom is described in an illustrated program, published by the magazine L'Express and produced in conjunction with an exhibition entitled "La Méditerranée des Phéniciens de Tyr à Carthage," hosted by the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, in 2007.

garments: "Contrairement aux consonnes aux vêtements rêches / les voyelles étaient nues" (10). Alphabets are also distinguished by their origins : "Il y a des alphabets de ville et des alphabets de champs" (12).

French and Arabic, identified more specifically in these verses as Roman and Arabic letters, represent antithetical values. These two distinct letter systems appear in four alternating sequences in the first half of "Les mots," i.e. Roman, Arabic, Roman, Arabic. While Roman letters are familiar to francophone readers, the representation of Arabic letters here is problematic. Firstly, Arabic letters do not appear in Arabic script, but rather are represented by romanized transcriptions of their Arabic pronunciation. The first letter of the Arabic alphabet, for instance, appears as Aleph. In this manner, Khoury-Ghata, like some postcolonial writers cited in Ashcroft's The Empire Writes Back, uses language variance to "signify difference while employing a sameness which allows it to be understood"(51).

However, the comprehensibility of Arabic letters is complicated by their not being explicitly identified as such, although some verses scattered throughout the poetic sequence provide contextual clues, like the evocation of camel drivers and dunes. One verse refers explicitly to the Orient: "Mais les loups ne connaissent pas l'Orient", and the evocation of the aforementioned Old Testament figures suggests the geographical context of the Holy Land.

Context aside, the romanization of Arabic letters enables the Francophone reader unfamiliar with Arabic to orally reproduce the Arabic letter. While the romanization of Arabic implies a weakening of barriers between the two languages, it also symbolizes the

loss of the Arab letters' scriptural and, some would argue, sacred identity. On the other hand, this strategy highlights Khoury-Ghata's attachment to Arabic as an oral language rather than as a written language. Insisting on an oral production of Arabic letters allows the poet to remain faithful to the expression of her own mother, whom she claims was illiterate. It further reinforces the notion of myth as an oral expression and the tradition of poetry as an oral performance.

Khoury-Ghata's representation of Arabic as an oral expression is also significant because oral Arabic, which encompasses many dialects, has traditionally been excluded from the Arabic literary canon. The standardized system of written Arabic is accessible to all literate Arabophones, no matter what dialect(s) they speak. Moreover, in the hierarchy of Arabic expression, expression of Arabic dialect is subordinate to standard written and oral Arabic systems which are customarily used by highly educated speakers in a formal context, i.e. media, academic institutions, conferences.

Ashcroft's observation that the interface of radically different oral languages can produce a gap beyond which the "cultural Otherness of the text cannot be traversed" appears to be somewhat valid here (54). At the same time, the gap produced by the untranslatability of the Arabic letters lends them an aura of mystery, which enhances their value as an enigmatic component of myth.

Another distinction between the two language systems is produced by descriptive verses that portray each sequence of letters. Anyone who has read the nineteenth-century French poet Rimbaud's poem "Voyelles" is familiar with his provocative and chromatic renderings of the capitalized vowels AEIOU:

A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles,  
 Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes  
 A, noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes  
 Qui bombinent autour des puanteurs cruelles, (...) <sup>109</sup>

The preceding chapter demonstrated how the contemporary Syrian-born poet Adonis, an admirer of Rimbaud and whose verse Khoury-Ghata has translated, sometimes uses Arabic letters in a similar playful and symbolic fashion.<sup>110</sup> Verses in An Introduction to the History of the Petty Kings provide a another example:

Kâf	trembles beneath a dissenting nucleus deep as night
Tâ	is a history roofed with corpses and the vapor of prayers
Alif	a gallows moist with a muddy light
Bâ	a knife that scrapes off human skin and fashions it into sandals for two heavenly feet, in a map that extends...etc.

Arabic letters arranged in such a fashion in Adonis' verses sometimes engender multiple meanings. As the translator Shawkat Toowara explains, the four Arabic letters portrayed in these verses spell the word "kitab" (book) (211).

The poetic manipulation of letters of the Arabic alphabet evokes one traditional oral form of Lebanese poetry known as "zajal" that represents a technique called "al-alifiyyat," which involves reciting a sequence of verses whose first letters correspond to

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<sup>109</sup> Lionel Ray, Arthur Rimbaud, (Paris: Seghers, 2001) 110.

<sup>110</sup> Khoury-Ghata translated his book of poetry entitled Commencement du corps fin de l'océan, (Paris: Mercure de France, 2004).

the order of the Arabic alphabet.<sup>111</sup> Although Khoury-Ghata's verse does not adhere to the meter of "zajal," it could be interpreted as paying homage to Lebanese poetry and oral traditions.

In these verses, each Roman and Arabic letter is represented by a sort of *ekphrasis*, a verbal portrait, in which an object or figure sometimes resembles or evokes the alphabetic sign that it purports to represent. While the reader can easily grasp the correspondence, if there is one, between the Roman letters and their respective portraits; the link between the Arabic letters and their portraits places the reader "at the threshold of the untranslatable," a posture explored by Moroccan writer Abdelkebir Khatibi in Love in Two Languages (5).<sup>112</sup>

Published in a limited edition by Maeght in 2001, Khoury-Ghata's Alphabets de sable, which features a lithograph by the Chilean artist Matta, represents Arabic letters in a similar manner. In fact, many of the Arabic letters and verses are identical to those found in "Les mots;" however, they are not portrayed in the same expansive cosmogonic context that characterizes the representation of "Les mots". Rather, the content of verses in Alphabet de sable is limited to portraits of Arabic letters, including some that are not represented in "Les mots," such as the letters "lam" and "waw."

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<sup>111</sup> Arab literary critic and translator Adnan Haydar traces the historical development of the Lebanese "zajal" which originated in Andalusia, in "The Development of Lebanese Zajal: Genre, Meter, and Verbal Duel", Oral Tradition 4/1-2 (1989): 189-219. He describes it as a multiform poetic discourse that evolved into an important oral tradition, particularly in Lebanese mountain villages, where public competitions between performers of "zajal" serve as occasions for village gatherings.

<sup>112</sup> Samia Mehrez discusses the relationship between French and Arabic in the context of North African literature. Her approach is useful with regard to examining bilingual (Arabic-French) writers from other Arab countries like Lebanon; however, it is essential not to overlook the historical and cultural differences, as well as personal choices, that influence each writer's language strategy.



LAM  
 Est cri de neige première  
 dans la verticalité du puits  
 Lettre de lait fixée sur la  
 lèvre inférieure de l'alphabet...(…)

And

WAW  
 Depuis que les vents parlent  
 arabe  
 Waw aboie à la lune dans  
 un alphabet désert

In the original text, the calligraphic form of each Arabic letter is rendered in large print in the right margin next to corresponding verses. Considering the shapes of the letters “lam” ( ل ) and “waw” ( و ) and the alliteration that marks both sets of verses, one can appreciate the manner in which Khoury-Ghata reveals the letters' graphic and aural attributes.

"Les mots," which does not offer the immediate visual pleasure of contemplating the calligraphic renderings of Arabic letters, nevertheless represents unusual images. The first sequence of letters includes 3 small letters of the Roman alphabet: i, h, and o, which appear in the following verses:

la lettre “i” fente de colibri femelle  
 “h” échelle à une seule marche nécessaire pour remplacer avant la nuit un  
 soleil grillé  
 "o" trou dans la semelle de l'univers

The correspondence between each letter and its portrait is fairly evident: “i” represents a cleft, “h” resembles a one-rung ladder, “o” is precisely a hole. These letters also produce images of aerial and universal objects: bird, ladder, sun, hole, and universe. It is not clear why the poet selected these particular letters and the order in which they appear, although one could conjure a meaning for the three letters in sequence, “iho,” which resemble the names of deities. For example, Iao is a Phoenician deity; the Jewish deity is Yaweh; a Maori god of creation is named Iho. This interpretation would frame the letters in a sacred context. Moreover, the organization of letters in groups of three evokes the sacred as well.

The next sequence of letters, which occurs a couple of stanzas later, corresponds to the first three letters of the Arabic alphabet: Aleph, Ba, and Tah. ( ا , ب , ت ). (In Alphabets de sable, the calligraphic rendering of the letter "Tah" ( ط ) represents a different letter of the alphabet, which sounds similar.) The organization of the Arabic letters as a triad also evokes a fundamental characteristic of the Arabic lexicon, which is that most Arabic words are based on a trilateral system, i.e. each word is based on three letters:

Aleph souffle de droite à gauche / pour effacer dunes et chameliers /  
qui comptent les étoiles la tête dans le sable / douze fois de suite / Ainsi

C'est dans la bassine du “Ba” qu'on lave le sang menstruel / de la lune /  
dans le cuivre pérenne / quand les femmes sur les terrasses nocturnes font  
des vœux / irréflechis

“Tah” arpenté une terre pauvre en herbe et en compassion / seules  
 comptent les gesticulations de l’ombre qui / efface écrit / efface écrit  
 pas et passants (11)

The reader might recognize the movement of Aleph from right to left, as mimicking the direction in which Arabic is written. Oriental tropes such as dunes, camel drivers, and sand provide a geographical and cultural context. This assumes a lot on the part of the reader's comprehension. Nonetheless, while the untranslatable gap renders the Arabic letters enigmatic, the accompanying description's representation of cadence, sounds, and vivid images arguably compensates for what may be lost in translation.

Furthermore, despite the translation gap, the reader may grasp the difference between the descriptions accompanying the Arabic letters and those of the preceding Roman letters for the following reasons. Firstly, the Arabic letters are capitalized and their portraits are longer, more elaborate, and dynamic. Secondly, the Arabic letters are affiliated with human gestures. Two of the Arabic letters, namely Aleph and Tah, express ambulation as well as the act of writing, whereas the letter Ba, which portrays women washing and wishing, is clearly associated with the feminine gender. All three letters are affiliated with the act of erasing or cleaning: the verb "effacer" is employed with Aleph and Tah; the verb "laver" is used with Ba.

Another shared characteristic of these Arabic letters is their affiliation with nocturnal symbols: stars, moon, nocturnal terraces, and shadow. Ba's striking depiction of women who cleanse copper basins of menstrual blood and make rash vows,

underscores the poet's strategy of giving voice to collective feminine figures, sources of the mother tongue, in an Arab context. The basin of "Ba" also evokes the nocturnal symbol of "la coupe."<sup>113</sup> In contrast, the Roman letters i,h, and o, are attached to feminine nouns that end in "elle", "femelle," "échelle," "semelle", and represent the fixed forms of bird, ladder, and shoe sole, rather than dynamic and vocal feminine figures. This dichotomy reminds us of Kristeva's distinction between the fixed notion of the phenotext and the dynamic process of the genotext.

To sum up a comparison between the Roman and Arabic systems, the preceding Roman letters evoke qualities of the universal, aerial, solar, and sensible; whereas the latter Arabic letters represent dimensions of the terrestrial, local, lunar, and enigmatic, which are closely linked to human gestures. However, in the next sequence, the net distinction between the two letter systems undergoes a transformation.

First of all, the dilemma of the untranslatable gap shifts to affect the Roman as well as the Arabic letters in the next sequence of Roman letters, in as much as the bond between the Roman letters and their portraits loses some of its transparency. This renders the Roman letters more inscrutable, like the Arabic letters. This Roman sequence, which includes the letters B, F, and H, reads as follows:

B revenait la bouche barbouillée de mûres  
 F titubait à force d'avoir fumé l'herbe du diable  
 son échelle sur le dos H prétendait avoir escaladé le mur du son (17)

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<sup>113</sup> A reader of Arabic will recognize that the letter "Ba" in Arabic script does indeed resemble a basin.

Like the first sequence of Roman letters, these verses are relatively short compared to those featuring the Arabic letters.<sup>114</sup> Unlike the first sequence of Roman letters, which represent cosmic objects or figures, these capitalized Roman letters are personified as terrestrial figures that exhibit transgressive behavior. Their oral consumption of and their indulgence in earthly pleasures – B's mouth is stained by berry juice, F is impaired due to having smoked devil's weed, and H is portrayed as an imposter – bring them into closer proximity to the preceding Arabic letters, whose terrestrial affiliation and behavior are similarly excessive, what with Alef's depiction of camel drivers' counting stars a dozen times, Ba's articulation of rash vows, and Tah's endless pacing. The orality expressed by B and F suggests the subversive impulses of the semiotic.

Thus, the distinction between Roman and Arabic letters begins to blur. Both value systems are now attached to the terrestrial, where figures manifest immoderate and impulsive traits. Khoury-Ghata's use of personification for both Roman and Arabic letters at this juncture suggests that language is a dynamic and interactive human endeavor, marked by gaps, excesses, and foibles. She envisages language as the expression of a gesture, a corporal expression, rather than a product of the intellect.

The influence of the Arabic system reaches a climax in the next sequence. So far, each sequence has been composed of three letters. What follows several stanzas later is a page-long description of ten different Arabic letters (with the letter Aleph mentioned twice), which is located roughly in the middle of "Les mots," signaling its status as the

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<sup>114</sup> The poet's selection of the letters B, F, and H remains open to interpretation.

heart of the poetic sequence and the crux of this linguistic exchange.

The last, exceptionally long sequence, only a part of which appears below, includes the following letters: Aïn, noun, Ha, Tah, Dad, Sad, Aleph, Sine, Ra, and Kaf. An explanation for the order in which the letters appear remains elusive; however, the extraordinary quantity of letters in this sequence (tripling the number of those in the first three sequences) and the complexity of their portraits accentuate even more the privileged role that the poet assigns to Arabic. In addition, the appearance of the placename TYR, in capital letters, pays tribute to the Lebanese origins of language.<sup>115</sup>

que savons nous de “Aïn” qui allumait sa lampe entre deux vagues  
de la concavité matricielle de “noun” (...).  
C’est dans un linceul à quatre noeuds dans un filet de pierre  
qu’Aleph fut repêchée au large de TYR la vieille (...).  
“Dad” est ma mère dit la terre  
“Sad” ma marâtre

Elles marchent depuis le début de l’alphabet à la recherche de la lettre

UNE qu’on soulève telle dalle de pierre pour retrouver les  
ossements de la langue première...(19)

As we have observed, Khoury-Ghata’s poetry manifests numerous characteristics of Durand's nocturnal regime, whose archetypes and symbols evoke the maternal figure and the domestic sphere. One of the major characteristics of the nocturnal order is the synthetic structure's elaborate representation of numerals, particularly with regard to the

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<sup>115</sup> In my interview with Khoury-Ghata, she indicated that she selected certain Arabic letters for the force that they evoked when articulated.

triad and tetrad, which are affiliated with the lunar cycle, one privileged domain of the feminine figure (327).

Khoury Ghata's use of the numerals 3, 4, and 12, contributes to her representation of the mystical origins of language. "Les mots" represents altogether four sequences of letters (two Roman and two Arabic) and each of the first three sequences is composed of three letters (i,h,o; Aleph, Ba, Tah; B,F,H). "Three" and "four" appear in the the aforementioned sequence: "Trois bougies alignés annoncent une dispute" / "Quatre cierges autour d'une couche appellent la mort." As for the numeral "twelve," the product of three and four, it is featured in the first description of the letter Aleph, which counts stars «douze fois de suite.»

The sum of all of the letters in the last sequence, with Aleph appearing twice in the sequence, is eleven. However, adding "la lettre UNE (the letter ONE)" increases the sum to twelve. Analyzing this system of numerals one step further reveals that the last sequence can be divided into 3 sub-groups: 4 letters of "Ain", "noun", "Ha", "Tah", 4 letters of Aleph, "Dad", "Sad", "la Lettre Une", and finally, 4 letters of "Aleph", "Sine", "Ra", "Kaf". Other numerals represented in "Les mots" are equally symbolic, including one, which appears in numerous verses, and five, affiliated with the first five words, pebbles distributed to five continents. Finally, the numeral seven, which evokes the seven days of creation, is mentioned in the last description of Aleph, "a tramp translated into seven languages." This demonstrates the extraordinary measures, whether taken wittingly or unwittingly, on the part of the poet to organize this last sequence of letters into a matrix whose significance is linked to the lunar cycle and, thus, to maternal figures.

Moreover, the prominent position of the female figure is represented in this sequence by two themes, the double and the maternal which, together, signify the poet's dual fidelity to her mother tongue, Arabic, and her adopted language, French. The letter "Ain," "a lamp between two waves", alludes to the Arabic letter's wavy structure ( ع ) and the poet's illuminating position between two languages. Evoking the shape of a womb, the letter "noun"( ن ) connotes the maternal figure. The letters "Dad" and "Sad," which are nearly identical in appearance ( ص , ض ), express respectively "mother" and "stepmother," and thus symbolize the dual relationship with the maternal language and the adopted one. The reference to the plural feminine subject, "Elles" (They), on a quest for a feminine object, "la lettre UNE" (the letter ONE), underscores the collective and active role of feminine figures in the genesis of language. In another verse, the portrait of the letter "Sine"( س ), as a ladle that stirs up stars from the devil's marmalade, evokes the traditional domestic feminine figure, working with both terrestrial and celestial elements. While the first three sequences of letters (two Roman and one Arabic) underplay the representation of feminine figures, this last sequence celebrates domestic and maternal figures that forge the implicit bond between the origins of language and the mother tongue.

Another significant and recurring theme represented in this sequence is the mobility and plasticity of language. Aleph, the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, metamorphoses into multiple figures. First, it evokes the resurrection of a feminine figure by being fished, like a mermaid, out of the water off the coast of Tyr.



C'est dans un linceul à quatre nœuds dans un filet de  
 pierre qu'Aleph fut repêchée au large de TYR la vieille (19)

Then, in subsequent verses, the letter functions as "bague de sourcier," adopting the form of a masculine symbol. This evokes its graphic representation as a straight vertical line. Finally, Aleph becomes a «va-nu-pieds en sept langues." This alludes to its nomadic identities as a letter in numerous alphabets.

Other Arabic letters in the sequence include the tribal troublemaker and clubfooted "Kaf" whose "anger comes "d'un lointain alphabet», the spiritual "Ra" who calls upon "les anges qui traversent l'évangile à pied," the putrescent "Ha", and the famously heavy "Tah." They contribute to the fabrication of a universe of contrasting figures, whose exaggerated traits express the picaresque and represent numerous antitheses: profane/sacred, celestial/terrestrial, and generation/degeneration. This last sequence of Arabic letters concludes the interface of the two alphabet systems. Subsequent verses segue into the voice of an anonymous maternal figure, an archetypal "she," further underscoring Khoury-Ghata's narrative of cosmogonic myth as a return to origins by way of the maternal figure and language, which suggests Kristeva's concept of the maternal as the site of origins in the signification of language as well as Durand's notion of the archetypal maternal in the nocturnal order.

### Conclusion

My analysis of "Les mots" shows that, while Khoury-Ghata appreciates the differences that characterize French and Arab languages and cultures, and is sensitive to the gaps that an engagement with two languages inevitably produces, she insists on

fusing connections between them, producing a network of “interdependence and intersignification” (Mehrez 122). Indeed, as implied by the mythico-poetic position, the poet’s return to a primal language establishes a meeting place where the personal/particular and the collective/universal coincide. This engenders a movement toward the establishment of a syncretic myth, whose center celebrates the poet’s own Arab Lebanese and maternal origins, while highlighting her identity as a bilingual and bicultural writer.

Whereas a bipolar construction of two value systems risks producing a permanent schism, Khoury-Ghata’s contrapuntal use of different language codes in "Les mots" avoids that end. These verses propose neither a homogeneous nor a symmetrical system, but rather the genesis of a linguistic and cultural dialogue that promotes the expression of transnational and plurilingual identities.

#### Arabic as an Expression of Misogyny in *Sept pierres pour la femme adultère*

The preceding examination of Khoury-Ghata’s verse demonstrates the poet’s profound attachment to her maternal language, Arabic, especially with regard to its Phoenician and Lebanese Christian origins; however, the representation of Arabic in the novel *Sept pierres pour la femme adultère* reveals her ambivalence, if not hostility, towards Arabic in as much as she represents an Arabic lexicon and particular expressions to support her explicitly harsh criticism of the status of women in a conservative Muslim society. The representation of Arabic in this novel also highlights Khoury-Ghata's role as a translator and interpreter who mediates between languages and cultures. In contrast

with “Les mots, in which the poet evokes a Cadmus-like role of conveying the alphabet to the Occident; the novelist/narrator of Sept pierres pour la femme adultère expresses the notion of revealing to the Occident what she formulates as an unbridgeable gap between certain Muslim and Western points of view.

In the novel, a Francophone woman has fled an adulterous affair in Paris to join a French humanitarian mission established in an isolated Middle Eastern community called Khouf, located on the edge of a desert. The novel does not provide a French translation of the village name, which signifies "crainte"; however fear is precisely the sentiment that governs the behavior of all of the female characters. Fear also permeates the entire village community, which is threatened by desertification and deluge due to the construction of a dam nearby. There, the Francophone female protagonist meets Noor, a neglected village housewife and mother, who finds herself pregnant after being raped by a Western stranger during a sandstorm. We learn later that the rapist supervises the dam construction. Accused of adultery, Noor awaits her execution by lapidation, as decreed by a fatwa.

The significance of the narrator’s translation skills is revealed in the novel’s first chapter as she contemplates her own translation of Noor’s name: "Lumière', tu traduis avec ta manie de faire voyager les mots entre ta langue maternelle et le français appris dans les livres" (17). The narrator thus suggests that the language spoken in Khouf is her maternal language and that she acquired French in school. However, since the narrator does not explicitly specify which language is spoken in Khouf, or for that matter, Khouf’s geographic location, the reader is left to her/his own devices to identify the language in

question.<sup>116</sup>

Noor's name is an abundant source of symbols and metaphors. The glossing of the Arabic word "noor" into the French word "lumière", which represents the narrator's first act of translation, is not far from suggesting God's first act of creation in Genesis when He commands: "Let there be light." This act of translation therefore suggests the narrator's omniscient and sacred role of creating/interpreting the Other for the reader. In addition, Noor, the principal protagonist, represents an enlightened individual in this somber village. Her proximity to nature, as well as her domestic skills and maternal wisdom, contribute to her portrait as a "bon(ne) sauvage." In the context of mythical images according to Jean-Marc Moura's essay "Imagologie littéraires et mythe," she resembles "les figures de l'euphorie primitive (enfant, femme-enfant, guerrier et sage)," who populate contemporary "primitivist" narratives (213). In fact, Noor arguably incarnates some of the qualities represented by the heroine in contemporary novelist Le Clézio's *Désert*, a "primitivist" narrative discussed by Moura. Leila is a desert nomad, whose name in Arabic is affiliated with the night, but whose luminous presence radiates a feminine tenacity. Like Noor, she is a marginalized woman; however, she is more threatened by Western values than the traditions of her indigenous society in which she ultimately seeks refuge.

As for the narrator in *Sept pierres pour la femme adultère*, who functions as

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<sup>116</sup> Khoury-Ghata states in interviews that the novel was inspired by a trip to Saudi Arabia, where her chauffeured vehicle was delayed in traffic due to a lapidation in progress: "Vénus Khoury-Ghata." *L'Internaute Week-end*, [www.linternaute.com](http://www.linternaute.com), consulted 15/10/2007.). The interview with Martina Sabra suggests that the novel is set in Iran. [Qantara.de-Dialogue with the Islamic World](http://Qantara.de-Dialogue-with-the-Islamic-World).

Khoury-Ghata's double, she represents what Moura identifies as “les figures du désir occidental (personnages occidentaux investissant l’espace primitif sur un mode pacifique ou violent)” (213). Determining "Khoulf" as a "violent" space of the Other, she will take on the mission of challenging village authorities to insure that Noor is not extinguished. Finally, Khoury-Ghata deploys the narrator to “mettre en lumière” the status of women in this environment.

Marginalized by different circumstances, the two “adulteresses” forge a relationship of solidarity with the objective of saving the lives of Noor and her unborn child. Their common cause is opposed by Khoulf’s religious establishment, which clings to tradition even as the desert community faces extinction.

#### Strategies of Post-Colonial Writers

The Empire Writes Back (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin) discusses the post-colonial writer’s strategy of re-placing his/her maternal language in the Anglophone text. Khoury-Ghata is not an Anglophone writer, and her engagement with Arabic and French does not represent the same power struggle that manifests itself in post-colonial writing. Nonetheless, the integration of Arabic words and expressions in this novel reflects some of the same strategies adopted by post-colonial Anglophone writers who write in English about their native cultures by using “the tools of one culture or society, while seeking to remain faithful to the other” (59). In contrast, Khoury-Ghata uses French in this novel to denounce another Other whose portrait appears to represent the Paternal symbolic order discussed by Kristeva. The Arabic language wielded by this male censor violently

opposes the "maternal" Arabic represented in her poetry.

In Sept pierres pour la femme adultère, the reader encounters dozens of Arabic words, in romanized script, only some of which are signified by italics. In addition, no glossary is provided.<sup>117</sup> In fact, the foreign words in the text are not explicitly identified as being Arabic; however, some of the lexicon may be familiar to Francophone readers, because a considerable quantity of Arabic vocabulary has been assimilated into French language and culture. Some Arabic words in this novel can be found in common French dictionaries, such as Le Robert Micro.

As The Empire Writes Back explains, "the technique of selective lexical fidelity which leaves some words untranslated in the text is a more widely used device for conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness." Moreover, words that are not translated announce "the fact that the language which actually informs the novel is an/Other language." This produces "a sense of cultural distinctiveness that forces the reader into an active engagement with the horizons of the culture in which these terms have meaning. The reader gets some idea about the meaning of these words from the subsequent conversation, but further understanding will require the reader's own expansion of the cultural situation beyond the text" (63).

While deciphering the Other in Khoury-Ghata's novel requires the reader's complicity, it is useful to examine how the representation of Arabic words and expressions in this particular novel serves multiple objectives. Among the broader

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<sup>117</sup> At a presentation of Khoury-Ghata's novel at the Sorbonne hosted by Pierre Brunel on 6 March 2008, the latter lamented the fact that there was no glossary available in Khoury-Ghata's novel.

objectives underlying the integration of Arabic in the novel, I propose that it offers the Francophone reader both an exotic and familiar experience. While twenty-first-century Francophones continue to consider Arabic an exotic oriental language, they have been conditioned to respond to representations of Arab and Muslim culture in French literature, cinema, and culture. In other words, Arabic is not as exotic as it used to be; however it still has the potential to represent the language of the provocative and disturbing Other portrayed in literature, cinema, and the media.

In addition, although Francophones may not recognize Arabic words, they are likely to respond to certain clichés, especially images that instantly evoke Arab and Muslim culture. For example, the image of a veiled woman, like the one pictured on the jacket of Sept pierres pour la femme adultère, renders a familiar portrait of the Muslim woman immediately accessible to most Francophone readers. In addition, the novel's descriptions of desert terrain and village life provide contextual clues. Therefore, the Francophone reader does not have to recognize or comprehend "exotic" Arabic words and expressions to conclude that the novel takes place somewhere in the Middle East. In this regard, the representation of Arabic in the text may function more as an exotic sub-text supporting or reinforcing the reader's received knowledge.

While Arabic contributes to the text's exotic allure, it also serves a didactic function. The Empire Writes Back observes that glossing, "the most primitive form of metonymy," provides an ethnographic discourse. In this novel, Arabic words and expressions are often accompanied by a translation or an explanation that could serve as a pretext to educate the reader about Arab culture and traditions. The subsequent

examination of specific words and expressions suggests that one of the novel's objectives is to educate the reader about the status of women in rural Muslim communities like Khouf and expose the misogynic society oppressing them. In addition, the narrator's role as a language instructor for the village children will be shown as underscoring the value and challenge of teaching languages and cultures.

### The Poetic Dimension of Arabic

Given Khoury-Ghata's status as a poet, it is not surprising that the integration of Arabic also contributes to the novel's poetic dimension. The etymology and phonics of Arabic personal pronouns and place names contribute to the poeticization of the narrative. The symbolism of characters' names, like Noor<sup>118</sup>, whose qualities oppose the dark forces represented by the village leadership, is also demonstrated by other names beginning with the letter "A," which represents the first letter of both the Roman and Arabic alphabets. Pronounced "alef" in Arabic, the first letter of the alphabet is considered sacred because it is the first letter of Allah, the Muslim name for God. One female character is named Amina, which means "faithful" or "honest" in Arabic. She works as a domestic servant at the village clinic and befriends the narrator. She also represents an adulteress because she provides sexual favors to a young French physician working there. In a strange turn of events, she becomes the village's "bouc émissaire." Another female character is Aïsha-Kirstin, whose name both evokes the cherished last wife of the Muslim Prophet Muhammad and signifies her identity as an Irish Catholic

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<sup>118</sup> Khoury-Ghata's beloved second husband, Jean Ghata, also carried the name "Nour."



woman who chose at a young age to marry a villager. Her portrait as an exceptional woman is reinforced by the assistance that she provides the narrator to escape the village when her life is threatened.

Abdul, a taxi driver, represents the only sympathetic indigenous male character. His name means “slave of” in Arabic, which is the abbreviated form of a longer name “slave of God”. Abdul is the only male citizen of Khouf who defies the misogynist label. On the contrary, he aids women, like the narrator, by playing the role of husband so that they can be granted an audience with religious authorities. He also chauffeurs the narrator out of the village when her life is threatened.

In comparison with the first letter of the alphabet, “A,” affiliated with superior virtues, the letter “Z” represents the last and therefore, least virtuous, letter of the Roman alphabet. The shape of the letter “Z” also suggests a crooked figure. Two village women, Zahia and Zana, whose alleged sexual transgressions are punished by death, incarnate the negative connotation of “Z.” Noor’s three young errant sons, named Zahi, Zad, and Zein, are responsible for having informed their father about Noor's encounter with the Western man. In a lighter vein, the alliteration produced by their names produces a comic effect.

Celebrating the heritage of Arabic poetry, Khoury-Ghata pays homage to the renowned pre-Islamic Arab poet, Jahelide Oumrou’al Kais, whose verse is cited by the minister of Virtue when she pays him a visit to plead Noor’s case: “Arrêtons-nous et pleurons une aimée et sa maison.” The narrator picks up where he leaves off: “Tissée par le vent du nord, tissée par le vent du sud” (63). Besides alluding to the narrator's position

of being pulled in two different directions, the citation of this celebrated poet in this context is intended to demonstrate how much even the most narrow-minded village official values the secular heritage of pre-Islamic poetry, while perhaps underscoring his hypocrisy. On the other hand, perhaps for a brief moment in the narrative, poetry is represented as erasing the boundaries between the Muslim bigot and the secular Western woman.

#### Arabic as the Language of Misogyny

An examination of the lexicon of masculine titles and Muslim religious terminology suggests that the primary function of the representation of Arabic in this novel is to expose misogynic aspects of a village governed by Muslim Shi'i traditions. Many Arabic nouns in the novel identify the titles of Muslim Shi'i religious or secular leaders. The novel's first Arabic word, *cheikh*, appears twice on the first page. The female protagonist, who is yet to be identified by name, describes the purpose of the pile of stones that has been readied for her lapidation: "Le cheikh l'a promis. Le cheikh n'a qu'une parole." *Cheikh*, one of the Arabic words that can be found in Le Petit Robert, refers to the title of a tribal chief. He is responsible for maintaining the village code of honor. According to the village leadership, the rape of Noor is considered an adulterous act, and she is consequently judged as having violated the village code.

The second Arabic word, *fatwa*, whose definition is also available in Le Petit Robert, refers to the religious ruling against Noor: "Pour l'instant, la fatwa qui pèse sur elle n'a rien changé à sa vie." The representation of these Arabic words on the first two

pages of the novel is indicative of how Arabic will be represented throughout the novel, that is to express the harsh unchanging misogynic qualities of the Other who, in this novel, refers specifically to the traditional Shi'i male villager.

Other titles for men in the community include "mollah," the title of a Shi'ite religious leader, and "imam," another Shi'ite title identifying descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and Ali, his son-in-law. "Kadi" signifies judge. The most positive representation of a male title in the novel is that of "hakim," wise man, a title that the village women reserve for the elderly French physician who directs the village clinic. One representation of oppressive masculine power occurs when the narrator, addressing herself in the second person singular, recounts the response of several village leaders to her appeal: "Tu ne tiendras pas le coup face au cheikh qui désapprouve ton entêtement à vouloir sauver Noor de la mort, au kadi qui t'accuse de détournement de la charia. Les deux t'ont fermé leur porte au nez quand tu leur as apporté la lettre du mollah (92)." The accumulation of masculine titles in these two sentences alludes to the crushing role of village leadership. However, the significance of the Arabic word, "charia," which signifies Islamic law, remains unexplained. The absence of explanations and translations accentuates the gap between languages and cultures, and reinforces the incomprehensible practices of the Other.

Another religious title is that of the muezzin, the mosque official who calls Muslims to prayer five times a day. The call to prayer begins with the phrase, Allahou Akbar, "God is great", which is repeated often during the course of prayers. This expression recurs in the novel; however, the absence of its translation transforms it into a

strange incantation. Furthermore, in Chapter 3, when some of the village men assume the position of praying during the French national anthem at a screening of a French film, she mocks them: "Ce qu'ils entendent ne peut être qu'un Allahou Akbar chanté par un muezzin français" (27). The narrator thus implies that the village men can't tell the difference between the French national anthem and the Arabic call to prayer.

A critique of the muezzin is subsequently portrayed in Chapter 39, when he lashes out at Amina, whose subversive behavior challenges religious dogma. He announces "Kazaba al mounajjimoun," subsequently translated by the narrator as "Les voyants ont menti". To underscore his shrillness, the narrator describes the muezzin's voice as "si perçante elle fait grimacer l'air" (165-66).

Another masculine title, which represents a contemporary Western stereotype of the Muslim male, is that of the moudjahidin, a word that appears twice in the novel. During a geography lesson, the narrators' pupils recognize an aircraft because they know that its function is "pour aller bombardier les moudjahidin dans la montagne" (133). Aïcha-Kirstin derisively predicts the fate of the narrator's pupils: "Les doux deviendront les moudjahidinn (sic), les violents des terroristes, et les imams ceux qui sauront échauffer les foules par leurs prêches" (177). Her distinction between moujahidin and terrorists functions more as an ironic observation than as a nuanced portrait of the male villagers.

A significant number of Arabic words in the novel are linked to the Quran, the Muslim Holy Scripture. The absence of translation or explanation has the potential of rendering religious practices and customs more foreign, and consequently more alien and

menacing. For example, Noor refers to the religious rites to which she will be entitled on the occasion of her lapidation: “J’aurai même droit à la *Fatiha* mais pas aux *chawaheds* réservé aux croyants.” The word “*Fatiha*,” which is the opening verse of the Quran, is left entirely unexplained; however, Noor describes the “*chawaheds*” as two stones placed in the direction of the Muslim Holy city of Mecca, at the head and the foot of the defunct (16).

While most of the Arabic lexicon in the novel represents the oppressive hierarchical structure exclusively occupied by the village male, some Arabic words express the spiritual practices of the village women. Village women often refer to “*Chaytan*” (Satan). Contemplating the violence that awaits her, Noor sees in the landscape “un sable et un vent rouges comme la langue du *Chaytan*” (12). Bad weather in Khouf inspires one woman to recite a proverb: “Froid et sécheresse sont jambes du *Chayton*” (35). Women working at “la Maison de la veuve et de l’orphelin” explain that the female gender is suspected of having “des accointances avec les féministes étrangères, donc avec le *Chaytan*” (60). Evil is thus represented as being embedded in the landscape and omnipresent in the domain of women.

While references to the devil abound, there are a few evocations of “*malaikas*” (angels). Declaring herself a “*voyante*,” Amina leaves black magic to those who “plongent leur pain dans l’assiette de *Chaytan*. [Elle] ne travaille qu’avec les *malaikas* (...)” (104). According to Jalila, Satan “possède tout ce qui est en bas...le haut appartenant aux *malaikas* qui ne savent que voler” (177). The juxtaposition of devil and angels underscores the women’s belief in a Manichean universe, where the devil is

expressed as singular male and the angels as feminine plural.

Another Arabic word linked to the village woman's spiritual beliefs is "ta'wizat," which refers to incantations invoked as a protection against evil spirits or bad luck. Amina prepares an herbal tea for Noor with "ta'wizats, des invocations au Chaytan pour qu'il se retire de sous la peau de Noor" (44). When, in an act of protest, Noor strips naked, she provokes women to murmur "ta'wizats" (119). Arabic lexicon associated with women's spiritual beliefs distinguishes their superstitions from the religious dogma enforced by the masculine religious hierarchy; however, it still signifies a topos in which women are repressed.

Other Arabic words serve to identify practices that restrict and censure women's behavior. According to Noor, it was her sons who informed their father about her encounter with the Westerner: "Dis-le que je suis *gahba*." "Gahba" is not glossed; however, it is linked to transgression in her subsequent declaration: "Les *gahba*, on les tue à coups de pierres" (14). When the narrator begins to adopt local customs, Amina warns her, partially in jest, that she will soon wear a "hijab," a fabric covering the head and body of a woman to protect her modesty. When Noor disrobes in public to protest her situation, a woman offers an "abaya" to cover her nakedness.

When the narrator meets a young girl who shows off the bracelets that constitute part of her "moukaddam," her dowry, she asks the girl what would happen if her fiancé changed his mind. The girl responds: "Dans ce cas son père sera forcé de m'épouser et je garde les bracelets. Celle qui revient vierge chez ses parents ne trouvera plus preneur" (56). The narrator thus implicitly criticizes how the community condones the transfer of

a young girl from one male partner to the next. When the narrator learns that the mollah does not grant audiences to unaccompanied women, she is forced to undergo “un mariage par *mitaa* payé en espèces pour la durée de la visite et chacun chez soi une fois dehors” (57). Consequently, the narrator herself becomes a victim of the system that she intends to challenge.

While “hajja” refers to a Muslim woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, Jalila, an elderly busybody, is derisively labeled a “hajja de bazar” (76), because she has never set foot in Mecca. The plight of women, treated as exchangeable commodities, is summed up by the narrator: “Qu’elle soit Noor ou Amina importe peu. Toute *hourma* qui quitte le douar sans la permission d’un homme est bonne à prendre” (172). “Hourma” is one of many Arabic words that signifies woman, and the absence of an explicit translation in these contexts reinforces the representation of women in Khouf as veiled figures, literally and figuratively. Referring to the death of Amina in place of Noor, the novel’s last paragraph concludes: “Une hourma a payé pour une autre.” Since most of the Arabic vocabulary and expressions in the novel contribute to the portrait of a misogynic Muslim society, the Arabic language becomes the signifier of immobility, intransigence, and religious zealotry, and thus coincides with the static and theological dimension of Kristeva's notion of the symbolic.

### Negotiating Two Languages

The narrator who plays the double role of storyteller and one of the protagonists also functions as a translator for the reader. This position mirrors that of the author in as

much as Khoury-Ghata represents in her prose and poetry her maternal tongue, Arabic, and Arab culture. Representing the ethnography of his own culture, the post-colonial writer “stands already on that position which will come to be occupied by an interpretation, for he/she is not the object of an interpretation, but the first interpreter” (Ashcraft, 60).

The narrator’s contemplation of her own translation skills in the text, “tu traduis avec ta manie de faire voyager les mots entre ta langue maternelle et le français appris dans les livres” (17) poetically expresses translation as a voyage from one language to another, and from one culture to another, implying to what extent displacement transforms language. The metaphor of voyage used to describe the act of translation draws inspiration from the long journey undertaken by the narrator to arrive in Kouf. Furthermore, the narrator indicates that translation involves a passage from the maternal tongue to formal written instruction: “entre ta langue maternelle et le français appris dans les livres.” Thus, the act of translation involves multiple transformations and passages.

Khoury-Ghata implies that negotiating between two languages is a difficult endeavor that attracts criticism on the part of the village inhabitants. In Chapter 4, Amina, whose attachment to the narrator vacillates between respect and envy, mocks the narrator’s unusual language skills: “Trois langues, alors qu’elle ne sait pas tenir correctement un balai (...)” (31). In Amina’s estimation, the narrator’s mastery of languages does not compensate for her lack of domestic skills.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> The third language to which Amina refers is not specified; however, she could be referring to English, since there are a few English expressions in the novel. One occurs when Aïcha-Kirstin, a native



Demonstrating her mastery of Arabic by reciting the renowned pre-Islamic poet Jahelide Oumrou al-Kais, the narrator earns the reproach of the Minister of Virtue. Criticizing her French accent, he advises her to abandon her “moitié occidentale” and guard the authenticity of her “moitié orientale” (63).

While the narrator’s bilingual status grants her access to two worlds, it also provokes mistrust. She reminds herself: “Tu parles deux langues alors que tu n’as qu’une bouche, l’arabe pour les amadouer, le français pour cacher tes vraies pensées” (175). She thus alludes to using both languages as tools of manipulation, Arabic for flattery and French for dissimulation. Speaking in two tongues evokes the traditional menace posed by duality and instability, which misogynic societies associate with the female gender.

Language pedagogy represents a theme dear to Khoury-Ghata, whose female protagonists often pursue the vocation of teaching. A young pregnant victim of incest, Zana, is portrayed as the narrator’s protégée who is keen to learn two languages: “Le français de gauche à droite, l’arabe de droite à gauche. Aleph et A sur la même ligne, ba’et et B, (...)” (110). Zana’s approach to studying the two different alphabets side by side indicates that she perceives a certain harmony exists between the two languages.

In contrast, the narrator’s other students, all male, struggle to learn French under her instruction. While she approves of the manner in which they “arabisent les mots français...c’est au français de bouger, d’être moins rigide, de devenir plus conciliant.” (147), she disapproves of their taking excessive liberties to transform French words into

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Anglophone, says to the narrator: “Thank you, Miss” (160); Pupils wear t-shirts with the expressions, “I love America” and “Fucking Bush.”

Arabic ones: “lapin” becomes “labin” (yaourt), “âne” becomes “ain” (oeil), and “herbe” becomes “harb” (guerre). This "arabisation" of French words again highlights the gap between the two languages and cultures.

The children’s transformation of the final word, “herbe”, a symbol of femininity and fertility, into “harb”, war, suggests a latent violence lying beneath the surface of the boys’ word games. While the studious mother-to-be perceives the two languages as symmetrical, the young boys’ excessive "arabisation" of words produces an unwelcome imbalance. Their "violent" manipulation of language reinforces the negative portrait of the male gender in Khouf.

As the translator and Noor’s advocate, the narrator assumes in multiple ways the role of the mediator who negotiates between languages and cultures, as well as between misogynist leaders and female victims. However, in the novel’s conclusion, the powers of mediation are finally revealed as limited. Noor survives, not because of the narrator’s mediation, but because the men in the village mistake Amina for Noor. The “A” in Amina also alludes to her doomed status as an adulteress and proxy for Noor. Nevertheless, since Noor definitively leaves her newborn daughter, a product of East and West, in the narrator's care before returning to her family, the novel's conclusion also implies that only the maternal role can transcend linguistic and cultural barriers, thus disenfranchising the village men from any form of mediation.

The portraits of village life in “Les mots” and in Sept pierres pour la femme adultère represent two distinctive interpretations of Arabic in the context of two different narrative structures. The seemingly flexible structure of poetry, which celebrates the

poet's attachment to her Lebanese Maronite origins, suggests the possibility of a rapprochement between French and Arabic. In contrast, the novel, whose more restrictive narrative structure recounts Muslim practices incompatible with Khoury-Ghata's bilingual and bicultural identity, suggests an irreconcilable gap between French and Arab languages and cultures. Both approaches demonstrate to what extent Khoury-Ghata explores the tensions and limits of her bilingual identity in verse and prose.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> The focus of my dissertation is the representation of Arabic in Khoury-Ghata's poetry and novels; however, it is worth noting that her novel La Maestra serves as an interesting example of the integration of Spanish into a French text. Compared to the representation of Arabic in Sept pierres pour la femme adultère, the Spanish lexicon in Khoury-Ghata's novel, which is set in Mexico, is more prosaic and expansive. While much of the Arabic vocabulary in Sept pierres pour la femme adultère signifies Muslim clerical titles and dogma, Spanish vocabulary in La Maestra is extensively used to signify landscape, food, clothes, and everyday objects, and vastly outnumbers the Spanish titles of Mexican authorities. While the integration of Arabic in Sept pierres pour la femme adultère supports the author's criticism of certain Muslim traditions, the integration of Spanish, including poetic verse, into La Maestra promotes traditional indigenous Mexican culture.

## Chapter 5

### Narrative Structures: Autobiography and Conte

#### Introduction

Poetry critic Michael Bishop observes that Khoury-Ghata admits to a narrativity that is “utterly and instinctively poeticised” (95). Poet and translator Marilyn Hacker asserts in her introduction to Nettles that Khoury-Ghata’s “exuberant use of narrative in poetry – sometimes a mythos of the self, but more often narrative in all its inventive bravura – has been an affirmative return to poetry’s tale-telling sources (...)” (viii). While Hacker alludes to the “return” of the narrative in French poetry, Dominique Combe argues that narration in French poetry has never really disappeared and, in fact, has robustly survived in modern and contemporary French poetry, in spite of nineteenth-century poet Mallarmé’s “refus moderne de la narration” in favor of “Poésie pure.”<sup>121</sup>

Combe reminds us that the relationship between poetry and narration does not pose a problem for the Aristotelian notion of poetry, associated with the “*mimésis d’hommes agissant*” – c’est-à-dire *mythos*: histoire, intrigue, qui appelle tout naturellement une narration (l’épopée proprement dite), ou une représentation au sens scénique du terme (la tragédie)” (527). He determines that the works of twentieth-century poets, such as Cendrars, Saint-John Perse, Aragon, Jouve, and Glissant, attest to the vitality of narration in poetry during the earlier part of the century. As for post-war poets, their “réhabilitation du récit” expresses a “lyrisme de la réalité.” In this vein, Combe underscores the approach of poets like Guillevic, whose “prosaïsme” is found

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<sup>121</sup> Dominique Combe, “Narration,” Dictionnaire de la poésie de Baudelaire à nos jours, 527-530.

“au coeur du projet autobiographique, jusqu’alors complètement décrié au nom de l’impersonnalisation’ qui, selon Hugo Friedrich, accompagne l’entreprise moderne (...)” (530).<sup>122</sup>

This chapter will examine how Khoury-Ghata’s poetry represents narrative structure in two forms. The first section will explore her representation in verse of a “projet autobiographique” whose mythico-poetic dimensions propose the construction of a mythobiography. The latter section will analyze her representation of a "conte en vers," whose characteristics suggest a hybrid of folktale and fable. In this manner, we will see how Khoury-Ghata’s poetry strives to fuse the prosaic and the extraordinary, as well as the personal and the universal, in the framework of traditional narrative and mythical structures.

### Biomythography in “Orties”

One of the singularities of Khoury-Ghata’s oeuvre is her representation of autobiography both in her poetry and in novels. Our examination of the verses in “Orties” from her collection Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits, along with extracts from her autobiographical novels, Une Maison au bord des larmes and La Maison aux orties, will investigate how Khoury-Ghata uses the mythico-poetic approach to construct a biomythography in verse. Reviewing the mythico-poetic approach in Brunel’s Dictionnaire des mythes littéraire, it allows the poet to assume the role of communicating the “ineffable” and “secret.” It also permits the poet to express the return to “a primal

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<sup>122</sup> Combe's discussion evokes that of "la poésie personnelle" broached by Jean-Claude Pinson.

language” and represent an order that is both “closed and open, particular and universal, located in and outside time.” The mythico-poetic approach, which does not impose a sharp distinction between fact and fiction, accommodates the ambivalent position of Khoury-Ghata, who attests in her prologue to La Maison aux orties: “Il m’est impossible de faire la part du vrai et de l’inventé, de démêler la masse compacte faite de mensonges et de vérités” (7).

Our examination will show how Khoury-Ghata’s mythico-poetic stance in “Orties” contributes to her self-portrait as a medium with privileged access to the dead, their voices, their gestures, their emotions, and their stories. This allows her to represent in poetry fragments of her own life in the context of re-establishing contact with her deceased mother and reconciling the past and the present, as well as the personal and the collective. Evoking mythical symbols and archetypes of the nocturnal order, the narrative of this 400-verse poem weaves the story of the poet’s past into the fabric of History. In the framework of anecdotes, her family’s travails as victims of domestic violence and instability coincide with the greater unraveling of a country and a story of migration that inclines toward the universal.

Critical references for this examination include Marilyn Hacker’s introductions to two translated collections, Here There Was Once A Country and Nettles, Daniel Madelénat’s essay “Biographie et mythe” in Questions de Mythocritique (51-58), Michel Beaujour’s Poetics and the Literary Self-Portrait, Françoise Lionnet’s essay “Autoethnography” in her Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture, Khoury-Ghata’s autobiographical novels Une Maison au bord des larmes and La Maison

aux orties, and, most importantly, her poem “Orties” in Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits.

Biomythography = Biography + Myth

In Marilyn Hacker’s introduction to the collection Here There Was Once A Country (2001), the former suggests that Khoury-Ghata’s poetry resembles the biomythography of Audre Lorde, the African-American writer and poet who claimed to have coined the term to describe her narrative in Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), which explores African and Caribbean mythologies, as well as feminine notions of home and community. Hacker observes, however, that Khoury-Ghata avoids the autobiographical focus that characterizes Lorde’s work. Nevertheless, what Hacker describes as the “significant absence of ‘I’” will be replaced by an engaged first person singular and plural in “Orties” published three years later. In Hacker’s introduction to a subsequent collection of translated verse, Nettles (2008), which includes the poem “Orties,”<sup>123</sup> the translator acknowledges the explicit autobiographical tone of Khoury-Ghata’s work in two novels, Une maison au bord des larmes and La maison aux orties, as echoing the autofictional stance of numerous contemporary women’s writers. Furthermore, she describes the verses in Nettles as an expression of the “mythos of the self,” and “Orties,” in particular, as the continuation of themes established in Khoury-Ghata’s two autobiographical novels.

The contemporary notion of mythobiography, whose etymology unites the truth

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<sup>123</sup> In Nettles, “Orties” is organized into four distinct parts marked by roman numerals.

and lies of “myth,” the life intrinsic to “bio,” and the writing of “graphy,” underscores myth critic Véronique Gély's observation that the twenty first century manifests “un remarquable déplacement des mots ‘mythe’ et ‘mythologie’ du champ du savoir académique.” She relies on the assessment of French Canadian anthropologist John Leavitt: (...) dans les sociétés occidentales la recherche de nouvelles idéologies en réponse aux idéologies dominantes insatisfaites mène à la création d’innombrables sous-cultures et de quêtes personnelles qui valorisent massivement la notion de mythe" ("Pour une mythopoétique" 1).

Daniel Madelénat takes a more indulgent position toward the fusion of myth and biography: “Entre le mythe et la biographie se nouent, au fil de l’histoire, des liens complexes de filiation, de synergie, d’opposition et d’hybridation” (51). He observes that the process of “mythisation” both banalizes (simplifies) and immortalizes the biographical narrative. He adds that it “vindicat superstructures and the cultural” at the expense of “infrastructures and the economic” -- “un rôle légitime dans le devenir individuel et collectif (...)” (56).

Madelénat proposes the Earth-Mother as one example of archetypes used in mythobiography, which serves to challenge “la méthodologie historique” and also represents “une figure idéale ou fabuleuse qui transcende les barrières de l’altérité.”

Furthermore, he explains the transformative power of myth:

(...) le mythe comme dans les dialogues platoniciens, intervient quand le logos atteint les limites de son efficacité (...) La biographie devient alors un acte chamanique où nous sortons de nous-mêmes pour nous affronter au mystère de l’Incarnation, où la transcendance de l’éternel se fait



immanente aux vies particulières (57).

Madelénat confirms the potential of poetry as an expression of this transformation: “La biographie peut se vouloir poème (apocalypse où le mythe et son aura poétique dévoile une essence, le mystère d’une individuation” (57). We will see that “Orties,” which explicitly represents a shamanic act, conveys the dimensions of biomythography proposed by Madelénat, especially with regard to the construction of a "figure fabuleuse," and the establishment of a link between the individual and collective.

#### Self-Portrait as Montage According to Beaujour

Michel Beaujour’s Poetics and the Literary Self-Portrait proposes a study of writers representing the literary canon, such as St. Augustine, Montaigne, Leiris, and Malraux, to develop a notion of the self-portrait, which may appear as an unlikely framework with which to examine Khoury-Ghata’s autobiography in poetry. For one thing, Beaujour’s notion of the self-portrait emphasizes the authors’ unwitting revelation of autobiography in their writing; whereas Khoury-Ghata does not hide her intention to represent autobiography. However, some aspects of Beaujour’s concept are arguably evident in Khoury-Ghata’s construction of an autobiography in verse. For example, Beaujour proposes that, unlike the autobiography, the self-portrait is distinguished by the absence of a continuous narrative and resembles a montage. Moreover, unlike the utopia suggested by autobiography, the self-portrait is prone to “violence, rupture, the incontinences of writing, and, also, to the upheavals of society and history” (3). On the

other hand, self-portrait shares with utopia “a mythic fantasy of a community alien to history” and “the conjuring up of traditional societies (...) (16-17). In addition, his discussion of “places of the return” proposes the self-portrait as a means to achieve a lost unity (87). Beaujour also establishes a link between the “imaginary archeology of each self-portrait” and the “archeology of the culture (159).

Likewise, Khoury-Ghata’s “Orties” does not represent a continuous narrative; rather, it constructs a montage of anecdotes, whose sequence of events remains unclear. Hacker ascribes to her text “the quality of exploded narratives, reassembled in a mosaic”.<sup>124</sup> The narrative gives the impression of moving forward, then backtracks, or constructs a cycle. The transition from one anecdote to the next creates ruptures suggestive of the familial and collective violence that the poem represents. As we have already observed, Khoury-Ghata's work conveys a fierce attachment to place. However, while her verse nostalgically conjures a traditional society, where temporal and spatial frontiers remain elastic, it does not avoid alluding to “the upheavals of society and history,” although this may be done in an oblique manner.

Beaujour insists on the self-portrait as the author’s channeling of “negativa,” characterized by the “absence of a center” (346). Françoise Lionnet refers to Beaujour’s notion of absence in her study of African-American writer Zora Neale Hurston’s autoethnography in Dust Tracks to emphasize the connection between self-portrait and myth. She suggests that Hurston accommodates the “absence of a center” by employing myth to “reunite two separate worlds, that of the living and that of the dead” (161). In an

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<sup>124</sup> Introduction to She says, trans., Marilyn Hacker (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press. 2003) xii.

assertion that echoes Beaujour's proposition as well as Madelénat's discussion of "mythisation," Lionnet proposes that if myth occupies such an important place in autobiography, it is due to "the realization that realist narratives are functionally distorting, and that myths are more appropriately evocative and suggestive of a subject's liminal position in the world of discursive representation" (122). In a similar fashion, Khoury-Ghata's verse appears to use a negative dynamic, created by the loss of her mother and maternal language and culture, to produce a self-portrait in the context of myth.<sup>125</sup>

#### Autobiography and Myth in "Orties"

Khoury-Ghata confirms that "Orties" represents "la poésie autobiographique" expressed by "une prose poétique." "Plus je vieillis, plus j'ai envie de raconter mon enfance, alors que je l'ai oubliée pendant trente ans (...) dans 'Orties,' je renoue avec mon enfance."<sup>126</sup> Two overlapping themes prevail in this mythico-poetic narrative. One is the representation of the mother-daughter bond, which is critical to the recovery of place, language, and history. Another theme is family violence, whose recounting reveals a parallel narrative of collective violence. The development of both themes begins with the voice of the poet, expressed in first person singular.

In her first collections of poetry, Khoury-Ghata uses "je," especially in the context of love poetry. For example, in Terres Stagnantes (1968), the poet expresses union: "Je

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<sup>125</sup> Kristeva's Black Sun addresses Freud's theory of mourning for the maternal object (9).

<sup>126</sup> Oumhani.

suis toi mêlé à la terre (...) Je suis la nuit qui coule à pic (...)” (29) and in Les Ombres et leurs cris (1979), she alludes to separation: “Je reviens de toi aussi nue que la soif” (90). In subsequent works, “je” appears less frequently; however, Khoury-Ghata uses the “je” to full effect in “Orties,” where the authoritative “I” splits off into a polyphonic enunciation represented by “tu” and “nous.” This cacaphony of voices suggests the plasticity, and perhaps instability, of Khoury-Ghata’s mytho-poetic position. It also underscores the attachment of the individual to the collective. While the poet’s use of “je” in this poem establishes her authority as the narrator, and implicates her as a witness to and participant in past events, her use of “tu” signifies a self-reflective posture that maintains a distance between her and the text. Her use of “nous” expresses her solidarity with family members and the village community. In contrast, her use of “ils” in this poem identifies “outsiders” whose origins lie beyond the frontiers of family and community.

First, we will examine how the poet represents the mother-daughter bond as a conjuring of the dead that requires secret knowledge. This representation reflects nocturnal themes and symbols affiliated with Durand’s mystical structures. The collection’s title, Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits announces the theme of the nocturnal and, perhaps, given its structure and alliteration, serves as an allusion to the celebrated tales of One Thousand and One Nights, known in Arabic as Alf layla wa layla. The poem’s title “Orties” refers to nettles, a dark-green prickly plant that grows untended in gardens and yards. Likewise, the first verse of “Orties” immediately signals the poet’s identification with the nocturnal. She establishes her presence as the writer “blackening

the pages,” capable of conjuring one character, but incapable of identifying him:

Noircir les pages jusqu’à épuisement des mots et surgissement de ce  
personnage que je vois pour la première fois  
Je ne connais pas son nom (9)

A few verses later, the poet implies that this mysterious character is trying to exercise some sort of control over her:

lorsqu’il tente de m’entraîner dans l’action  
j’ai décidé d’être seule maître du jeu (9)

Establishing a playful rapport between “je” and “jeu,” the poet’s resolve to take control could be interpreted as a measure of revolt, implying perhaps her reaction against the oppressive and overbearing patriarchal system that she consistently criticizes in her poetry and novels. On the other hand, the novel La Maison aux orties suggests that the mysterious character most likely represents her brother, Victor, whose vocation as a poet was cut short by his drug addiction and subsequent institutionalization: “Mauvais fils, mauvais frère, mauvais poète, il me supplie de lui ouvrir mes pages pour qu’il s’explique, puis change d’avis, dit qu’il étoufferait entre un verbe et un complément” (17).

Nonetheless, having taken matters into her own hands, the poet cannot progress without a second rendezvous.

Suspendue au milieu de la page  
j’attends un deuxième personnage pour prendre ma décision (9)

The poet gives the impression of awaiting her Muse, who emerges to provide her

with “le mot de passe ‘ORTIES’ pour faciliter ma tâche”. The granting of a password, whose typography accentuates its significance, announces the poet’s role as a medium, a shaman, who revives and communicates with figures from the underworld. The conveyor of the password plucks a nettle from the page and identifies herself as the poet’s mother.

elle s’arrête pour me crier qu’elle était ma mère  
 je suis forcée de la croire à cause de l’ortie  
 (...)
   
 Les orties sont des vieilles connaissances  
 des voisines dénuées de grâce hébergées par charité (10-11)

The link between mother and nettles, both emerging from underground, is also underscored in the first chapter of Une Maison au bord des larmes, which recalls the mother summoning her children from the kitchen window “face au soir qui faisait frissonner les orties du jardin et la plus basse branche du grenadier” (14). In La Maison aux orties, nettles evoke the mother’s nocturnal wanderings: “plantes noirâtres étaient sa seule fréquentation, son grand souci. ‘Je les arracherai demain’, annonçait-elle tous les soirs” (...) (9). Durand’s discussion of nocturnal images reveals a similar connection between a maternal figure and a plant in the context of the poet Novalis’ dream, in which “a mysterious blue flower metamorphoses into a woman, which concludes with a vision of the mother.” (Durand 265). The recurrence of the noun “orties” fourteen times in Khoury-Ghata’s poem, as well as its function as a treasured password, contributes to what Durand refers to in mystical structures as a “renversement complet des valeurs,” in which the small and the humble are accorded the superior values normally attributed to the large and the noble (317).

Aside from the connection of mother to nettles, the parallel position of “elle” and “je,” as the first two words in two subsequent lines, expresses the mother-child bond with the mother assuming a superior position. In contrast, the position of the word “mère” at the end of one line, followed by the "enjambement" of the “je.” suggests the separation of child from the mother. In the same two verses, the mother, a symbol of self-renunciation and death, is found at the end of first verse, whereas, the poet installs herself in the primary position in the following verse.

The authoritative “je” of the writer recurs two more times in the poem. This time, she retrospectively represents her mother’s death. Having encountered a stranger who invokes the password “ortie,” the poet is forced to return to her original position and contemplate re-working another page, which evokes the cycle of writing.

Le mot ORTIE me ramène à mon point de départ  
 je vais devoir aller à la ligne  
 ou reprendre une autre page  
 avouer que rien de ce que j’ai décrit n’est vrai (12)

The notion of the cycle is supported in “Orties” by a considerable number of words that begin with “re-“, such as “retenir,” “reconnaître,” “retrousser,” “retourner,” and “relier.” This idea conveys the sense of women’s time, proposed by Kristeva, with its emphasis on cycles and repetition, and the evocation of myths of resurrection. Moreover, Khoury-Ghata’s portrayal of a mother who defies death brings to mind Kristeva’s observation that, according to certain Christian traditions, “the body of the Virgin Mother does not die, but travels from one space to another in the same time frame,

whether by dormition (according to the Orthodox faith) or assumption (according to Catholicism).” (Oliver 352).

Later in the poem, similar to the effect rendered by the word “orties,” the announcement of death provokes the poet’s physical response and invokes the bittersweet taste of the maternal language.

L’annonce de la mort de la mère me jette dans la rue  
 je m’adresse aux passants dans son dialecte âpre comme fruit de  
 jujubier  
 crier pour écarter l’air qui entrave ma marche  
 me tais pour m’entendre pleurer  
 ramasse les larmes devenues pierreuses et les branches cassées  
 j’en ferai un feu alors que je n’ai ni cheminée ni mots à bruler (17)

Here, the “je” seems to disappear in the expression of grief, only to reappear several verses later as if the poet has regained some control of her emotions. Her intention to build a fire, a symbol of purification and rebirth, demonstrates an effort to fill the void left by her mother’s death, whose absence in the domestic sphere is symbolized by an empty hearth. The image of fire prevails in the following verses, conjuring with it the mother’s spirit, since she is subsequently portrayed kneeling in front of the hearth, whose flames she would swear at “quand un sarment trop vert faisait / des étincelles.”

Nursing the flames is just one of the mother's tasks. The poet often underscores her mother’s extraordinary work ethic. Having returned from the dead to resume the chore of removing the nettles from around the house - “j’aurais dû le faire de mon vivant” - the maternal figure is remembered as having “une serpillière dans une main / sa dignité dans l’autre”. Likewise, in La Maison aux orties, “La mère faisait plus confiance à son



balai, à sa serpillière et à ses casseroles qu'aux murs qui se dégradent d'année en année, qu'aux orties qui gagnent du terrain" (27).

Moreover, the mother is a nocturnal figure -- "elle enchaînait le jour à la nuit" -- and prefers to work after dark in lamplight: "célébrant la nuit avec sa lampe à trois mèches". In Une Maison au bord des larmes: "Ma mère nettoie de préférence la nuit, à la lumière du réverbère (...)" (27). Evoking the collection's title, the mother interrogates the owl, "Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits demandait-elle à la chouette / mais la chouette ne pense pas / la chouette sait" (19). Her interrogation of the nocturnal female creature implies certain wisdom on her part.

The mother is also linked to the mythical origins of language, which are highlighted by the portrait of Lucas, "le vieil instituteur," who "aima la morte". His attachment to the dead mother, an "analphabète," is reinforced by his vague origins, which are traced to "n'importe quel nord" or perhaps to a "trou de cimetière". "Je suis mort", he writes on the blackboard. Upon his arrival in the village, he was tasked with teaching the children three alphabets: "Le grec parce que tout vient de là / l'araméen à cause du Christ / le français pour venger Jeanne d'Arc et Vercingétorix" (16). This triad of languages pays homage to Greece as an ancient source of knowledge, as well as Christian and French mythical heroes who led revolts and were subsequently martyred for their efforts.

In addition to her close affiliation with nettles, the mother dries herbs for medicinal purposes at home: "jaune du persil qui active le sang récalcitrant / épaisse de la menthe contre les nausées / sinieuse du safran qui fait pâlir le riz / et de la verveine

capable d'apaiser la colère" (18). In this manner, she could be said to represent the "mère des herbes," a nocturnal feminine archetype who, like Osiris and Ishtar, is attributed with regenerative powers, according to Durand (341). Appropriating the role of mère-terre, the poet portrays herself as the "héritière" of her mother's domestic tasks and resumes the use of "je" in a final sequence of verses, where gardening is used as a metaphor for writing. The first two lines mirror earlier verses portraying the mother "une serpillière dans une main / sa dignité dans l'autre."

Le râteau dans une main  
 le crayon dans l'autre  
 je dessine un parterre  
 écris une fleur à un pétale  
 désherbe un poème écrit entre veille et sommeil  
 je fais la guerre aux limaces et aux adjectifs adipeux (25)

Again, the subject gives way to gestures that hint at violence:

je sarcle  
 élague  
 arrache  
 replante dans mes rêves (25-26)

However violent, these gestures, it is implied, lead to regeneration. The same gestures are also described in La Maison aux orties: "Armée d'un râteau ou d'un crayon je fais la guerre aux adjectifs et aux vers adipeux, élague une page, arrache des orties, arrose et replante même dans mes rêves" (28). In this manner, Khoury-Ghata recycles the mother-daughter bond in verse and prose.

Paternal violence

Paternal violence is a fundamental reference and constant source of anguish for Khoury-Ghata whose first autobiographical novel, Une Maison au bord des larmes, focuses on the devastating conflict between father and son. In the following verses, the recent present (yesterday) collapses into the distant past (a long time ago) when the father's anger "overturned the house".

C'était hier  
 il y a très longtemps  
 la colère du père renversait la maison  
 nous nous cachions derrière les dunes pour émettre ses cris  
 la Méditerranée tournait autour de nous comme chien autour d'un  
 mendiant  
 la mère nous appelait jusqu'au couchant (10)

The siblings are thus doubly threatened, by their father's anger, on the one hand, and by menacing nature, on the other. It is difficult to tell if the poet has intentionally constructed the juxtaposition of the homonyms "mer" (Mediterranean) and "mère." What is clear is that the mother appears to be the children's sole source of salvation. Forged by terror, their solidarity extends to their digestive reflexes, an attribute of the mystical system: "nous mangions notre chagrin jusqu'à la dernière miette / puis le rotions échardees à la face du soleil." This constitutes an insult launched at the tyrannic father, symbolized by the sun. Other verses recount another occasion when the poet and her sisters, as well as their neighbors, witness their father's wrath. This time, an inkwell, instead of the house, is overturned:

Que sont devenus les passants les soeurs?  
 Trois soeurs réunies en une seule qui tient la plume  
 la fait courir sur la page  
 et la page se met à parler  
 la page dit:  
 encrier renversé  
 lampe brisée  
 pétrole en flammes  
 incendie  
 voisins guettant dans la marge  
 alignés face à la fenêtre avec leurs seaux  
 ils conseillent au père de garder sa colère pour le jour  
 ses cris rayent le ciel  
 font fuir la lune  
 qui rebrousse chemin à l'approche de notre toit (13-14)

No subject is directly assigned to the violent acts “encrier renversé,” “lampe brisée,” however the father is implied as the perpetrator. The sequence of events unfolds in short bursts of noun phrases, capturing the violence like snapshots of a bad dream or the evidence of a crime scene. Une Maison au bord des larmes recounts the same event; however, unlike the verses in “Orties,” the novel explains what precipitated the father’s actions. Khoury-Ghata addresses her brother:

“Un dictionnaire lancé à ta tête rencontra la lampe et la brisa, la deuxième en quinze jours. L’essence déversée déclencha un début d’incendie qui ameuta les voisins. Monsieur Alphonse ricanait, tante Rose s’éventait avec le calendrier, madame Latifé lançait des seaux d’eau à l’aveuglette, son visage non voilé ne lui permettant pas de se montrer (...) Nous étions scandaleux” (53).

Comparing the poem to the novel, the former verses establish a distance between the narrating poet and the violence by representing the page as the “talking” subject - “la page dit” - who bears witness to the event on behalf of three sisters. It downplays the

brother's role in the event, but alludes to the figure of the angry father, chastised by the neighbors. In contrast, the latter also establishes a distance between the poet and the violence; however, it frames the event in the context of the poet's subsequent address to her brother and implicates his role in the affair. The description of each neighbor, identified by name, adds a touch of humor, which is completely absent from the poem. The poem thus represents a microcosm of the event, condensing the anecdote to a handful of fragments, like the broken lamp it represents. Its somber tone contrasts with the broad comedy depicted in the novel.

Khoury-Ghata recalls the same event in an interview: "Je continue de voir les voisins alignés derrière nos fenêtres, parce qu'ils sont venus éteindre l'incendie chez nous. Mon père voulait enterrer son fils vivant tous les soirs, parce qu'il n'avait pas de bonnes notes. Une fois, la lampe s'est brisée. Il n'y avait pas de l'électricité à l'époque et un incendie a alors couru le long de la salle de séjour. Les voisins sont alors arrivés avec leurs seaux d'eau...je me suis sentie couverte de honte quand j'y repensais. Cette scène, je n'arrive pas à la sortir de ma tête".<sup>127</sup>

Khoury-Ghata uses the antiphrasis to reveal harsh truths. The antiphrasis represents the logic of the mystical structure in Durand's nocturnal order, which also includes the symbol of the tomb. Here, she reveals terrible family secrets.

je dis connaissance pour ne pas dire terreur  
pour ne pas dire enfouissement sous terre quand le père décidait  
d'enterrer le fils et ses poèmes sous les orties (13)

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<sup>127</sup> Oumhani.

The repetition of the negative structure “ne pas dire” and the topos of burial signified by “enfouissement” and “enterrer” reinforce the “terreur” of the family drama. The alignment in the third verse, slightly offset, of the son and his poems “under the nettles,” alludes to their collective status as rejects, stigmatized, and destined for burial, if the father had his way.

The mystical logic of the antiphrasis is employed again later in the poem when the mother is portrayed avoiding the truth: “elle dit oiseaux pour ne pas dire guerre / elle dit guerre pour ne pas dire folie du fils”. The son is an asylum patient who has wandered home in the midst of war: “personne ne le reconnut / personne ne le chassa / c’était la guerre et la maison avait perdu sa porte / ‘Ma’man’ dit-il en deux temps” (23). In this manner, the poet refers to two subjects that the family avoids discussing, war and the son’s mental health. Furthermore, linking war and madness in the same sentence expresses the notion that they share a common source and provoke the same destruction.<sup>128</sup>

#### “Nous” as an expression of solidarity

Having expressed herself in the first person and second person singular, the poet uses the first person plural to include herself in a portrait of familial solidarity:

l’hiver venu  
 les orties montaient à l’assaut de nos fenêtres  
 interdisaient au jour de pénétrer dans les chambres

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<sup>128</sup> La Maison aux orties reveals the same portrait, except that the son calls “Ma’man, pour la troisième fois, alors que sa mère a quitté depuis longtemps ma page” (29).

narguaient la lampe à pétrole  
 la femme qui était notre mère partageait avec nous la même odeur  
 d'herbe jamais coupée et mêmes pluies (10)

The children are thus identified with the maternal figure and her odor of grass and water, evocative of untamed nature and sad neglect. Sibling solidarity is portrayed again in the wake of the mother's death as they work together on domestic chores. Their gestures give the sense of maintaining an umbilical attachment to the maternal figure: "et nous ramassions linge et nuages suspendus à la corde." They respond collectively to the mother's utterances: "elle disait mer / et nous nous hissions jusqu'à la lucarne (...) elle disait cavité brèche et / nous creusions avec rage (...) elle disait lettre / et nous attendions sur le pas de la porte la mauvaise nouvelle (...)" (22-23) Maternal utterances thus provoke actions with cosmic reverberations, encompassing the primordial elements of water, earth, and air, as well as the inscription of the word.

### Collective tragedy

We have already addressed the representation of violence in the context of gardening and writing, as well as in the domestic sphere. We also observed the reference to war in verses about the son's arrival home. In "Orties," evocations of war suggest a vaguely defined, yet pervasive larger threat, whose consequences affect the family and the community. The inconveniences and negative consequences of war are enumerated: The mother "dut traverser le pays en guerre pour se faire enterrer dans sa montagne" (11). "Un demi-siècle et une guerre en ont fait un rancunier à vie" (15). "Superflue la langue du pays / la guerre l'effacera" (14). "C'était la guerre et la maison avait perdu sa

porte”(23). Moreover, the mother’s persistent state of denial, or perhaps, naiveté, is represented by her absurdly mistaking “guerriers” for cats (21).

While anecdotes about overturned house and inkwell symbolize particular incidents of domestic violence, the act of “renversement” also signifies the destabilization of a larger community.

ça ne pouvait être qu’ailleurs  
 la colère du soleil renversait le pays  
 des hommes venus du côté sourd du fleuve cognaient aux frontières  
 je dis hommes pour ne pas dire sauterelles  
 je dis sauterelles pour ne pas dire fétus de paille fanes de maïs (19)

Again, an antiphrasis is employed in the context of violence, but in a more subtle context. This haunting image of “men coming from the deaf side of the river” and the negative construction “pour ne pas dire” that evokes locusts and corn silk functions as an oblique reference to the influx of Palestinians into Lebanon following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. The repetition represented by the anaphor “je dis (...) pour ne pas dire” constructs a barrier of denial. “Ils arrivèrent tous les soirs de toutes les années”. “Ils” refers to these “étrangers” who are neither family, nor villagers, nor compatriots. Their nocturnal passage is marked by hyperbole – “all of the nights” and “all of the years” suggesting time immemorial. Their speech, distinguished by “leurs langues / épaissies par le sel de la mer Morte / leurs gorges emplies du vent de la Galilée” reveals their geographical origins. They display the disorientation of refugees, because “le pays sous leurs pieds glissera vers le nord / le sud bardé de barbelés deviendra ouest” (20).



Recalling similar events in La Maison aux orties, Khoury-Ghata describes how the arrival of refugees in her Lebanese neighborhood provoked the grumbling of adults: “Pourquoi s’étaient-ils séparés des autres réfugiés groupés dans les faubourgs de la capitale?” As for the children who initially played together, “Une matinée avait suffi pour décréter que nous étions ennemis” (32).

### Reconciling the Personal and Collective

The poet aligns herself in the same verse with the dead mother and words, all of them figures in transit.

Pourtant  
il m’arrive de trouver crédible ce voyage de la morte et des mots (13)

Displacement prevails in the last stanza of the poem, which represents a transition in themes from the quiet intimacy of a mother-daughter relationship to the chaotic flight of refugees. The initial image is one of repose, portraying the poet sitting on the threshold, whose location signifies the liminal space shared by the living and the dead.

Assis sur le même seuil  
les mots de ma langue maternelle me saluent de la main  
je les déplace avec lenteur comme elle le faisait de ses ustensiles de  
cuisine  
marmite écuelle louche bassine ont voyagé de mains en mains (26)

The poet thus handles the words of her maternal language with the same care that her mother used with her kitchen utensils, whose shapes evoke the nocturnal symbol of “la coupe,” affiliated with the domestic feminine figure. The attachment to the maternal

is accentuated by the pronounced alliteration of “m” and the unpunctuated list of kitchen utensils, suggestive of the nocturnal verbal topos of “relier.” In this manner, Khoury-Ghata both domesticates the task of writing and rehabilitates her mother tongue. Moreover, the gesture of the hand is symbolic of women’s handiwork and the corporality of language. The significance of “mots” is underscored again in a subsequent verse:

Quels mots évoquent les migrations d’hommes et de femmes fuyant  
génocides sécheresse faim  
enfants et volailles serrés dans le même balluchon parlaient-ils  
l’araméen caillouteux  
l’arabe houleux des tribus belliqueuses (26)

The image of a quiet domestic scene, representing the passage of kitchen utensils from generation to generation, metamorphoses into the flight of families fleeing an accumulation of disasters, with children and beasts “in the same sack”. The interrogation of their language – Aramaic, Arab, or the language of “clicking marbles” – suggests that their identity is open to interpretation and evokes the migratory history of numerous peoples in the region. In La Maison aux orties, Khoury-Ghata’s prose provides a more precise explanation. It suggests that her mother felt a measure of empathy for the Palestinian refugees, because her ancestors had met a similar fate:

(...) fuites devant les Ottomans, les sauterelles, et la sécheresse. Ils allaient de village en village, enfants et volailles serrés dans un même baluchon  
(...) Quel dialecte fut le leur avant de s’être implantés sur leur montagne avec leurs chèvres, leur Evangile et cet alphabet dont ils exprimaient les sons mais pas l’écriture? (33).

“Orties” concludes then by juxtaposing domesticity and migration, two extremes

that represent Khoury-Ghata's poetic universe. Moreover, these final verses change the focus from "je" to "ils," suggesting that personal knowledge gives way to the reflection of a collective experience. The last expression "dans nos poches d'enfants" invites more attention because the possessive first person plural qualifying childrens' pockets implicates the "je" in the collective. The representation of language in the form of marbles, contained in pockets, evokes nocturnal mystical structures of miniaturization and enclosure, affiliated with the notion of an "intériorité protectrice" (Durand 240), which functions as a defense against the ravages of Time. The marbles' clinking sound recalls the rhythmic reflex of the synthetic structure and the pre-oedipal rhythmic drive of Kristeva's semiotic poetics. The children's intimate and tangible contact with language communicates an innocence and sense of play that stands in opposition to the precarious circumstances represented in preceding verses. This symbolic evocation of childhood with its durable treasure of language, as well as the merger of personal and collective histories, could be interpreted as a final act of reconciliation.

In the same manner that collected bits of glass represent a lost language, fragments of history and myth construct an autobiographical montage in "Orties." In contrast with the autobiographical novels Une Maison au bord des larmes and La Maison aux orties, whose more linear and uninterrupted prose anchors them more in reality, the poetry of "Orties," with its ruptures, ellipses, and evocations, its cyclical cadence, and implausible images, expresses the enigmatic and unbound voice of the mythico-poetic.

Loss and Recovery in “Variations Autour d’un Cerisier,” a “Conte en Vers”

Jean-Max Tixier savors in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry the “goût de la fable, le plaisir de conter, les méandres de la parole, le sens de l’évocation lestée de sagesse, de la parabole, de l’image féconde (...) (7). The poet, herself, affirms: “Je suis un poète qui raconte des histoires (...) On me qualifie de griotte ou conteuse” (Stout 313). “Variations Autour d’un Cerisier,” a 160-verse “conte” that concludes the collection Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits, illustrates how Khoury-Ghata’s poetics of fusion use mythical and binary structures to dramatize the cyclical experience of loss and the quest for recovery. Elements of folktale and fable represent mythical narratives that eschew the restrictions of spatial and temporal circumstances so as to have a more universal appeal. Khoury-Ghata’s circular narrative interlaced with lyrical verses explores the elasticity of these popular genres rooted in the oral tradition of storytelling. The poem’s fusion of genres and styles also brings into proximity oppositions, such as question and response, orality and writing, Orient and Occident, and life and death. Mediating the tensions produced by oppositions is the mother figure who persistently interrogates the meaning of loss and redresses its tragic consequences.

Mythical Structures: Folktale and Fable

Philippe Walter’s essay “Conte, légende et mythe” in Questions de mythocritique describes the “conte” as a desacralization of myth: “une sorte de mythe dégradé ou profané, émietté et disséminé” (59-68). According to Evguéni Mélétski, one of Vladimir Propp’s disciples, the evolution of “mythe” to “conte” involves certain

transformations. Among those that inform Khoury-Ghata's poem are the substitution of ordinary men for mythic heroes, the use of an indeterminate time instead of time immemorial, and a narrative focus on social rather than cosmic destiny. (61).<sup>129</sup>

In the tradition of folktale, this poem portrays a typical family, whose ordinariness is defined by the role of each family member in the traditional familial hierarchy: mother, father, grandfather, and a daughter figure named Nina, the only character assigned a proper name.<sup>130</sup> The family portrait is darkened, however, by references to the death of a "petit frère". Other evocations, such as "les enfants morts" at the dinner table and the grandfather's "réception au cimetière" indicate the occupation of the domestic sphere by the dead as well as the living, and that this cohabitation is not unusual. Secondary characters that have contact with the family include a gardener and a postman, who represent modest and respectable professions. The depiction of group activities, such as mothers' preparing meals, suggests a community that extends beyond one particular family.

While the immediate family members, with the exception of the dead child, resemble ordinary folktale characters, the poem's principal protagonist, a cherry tree, represents an extraordinary character more commonly portrayed in fables, which are apt to feature anthropomorphic characters. "Un cerisier," whose significance is announced by the poem's title, functions as the family member whose action triggers the poem's

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<sup>129</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphologie de conte* (Paris: Editions du Seuil. 1970).

<sup>130</sup> In my interview with Khoury-Ghata, she indicated that Nina was perhaps the name of a dear friend's mother.

narrative: “Le cerisier ce matin nous fit ses adieux / il partait pour l’Amérique” (125). Personification of nature and domestic objects is common in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry, which often portrays trees as sympathetic masculine figures whose positive attributes are superior to those of male protagonists. Khoury-Ghata is effusive about her attachment to trees: “J’aimerais revenir sur terre sous forme d’arbre. Les arbres sont des êtres humains, comme vous et moi, mais qui passent leur vie à regarder dans la même direction” (Stout 310). While the cherry tree has a prominent role in this poem, the qualities of the pomegranate, in particular, as well as the cypress, spruce, camphor, olive, oak, and willow are also addressed.

Anthropomorphism also manifests itself in the poem’s depiction of other marvelous characters, such as a lovesick shadow, a curious door, and a talking cat. In addition, animals and fowl, namely, a donkey, horses, kittens, a dog, rabbits, as well as sparrows, and a blackbird, contribute to the poem’s domestic scene. In this manner, the poem’s representation of human and non-human characters, ordinary and marvelous, as well as the living and the dead, does not entirely conform to Mélétrinski’s observation that the “conte” substitutes “ordinary men” for mythic heroes. Rather, the heterogeneous and multifaceted composition of family and extended community accentuates the “conte”’s social dimension.

As for the replacement of mythic time with an indeterminate time, the narrative’s most precise reference is linked in the first couplet to the place name of “l’Amérique.” The cherry tree’s destination of America provides a time frame and functions as an historical reference. Although the poem does not identify by name the emigrant’s origins,

the emigration of “un proche” represents an historical phenomenon known in Arabic as "hijra," emigration, which has affected millions of Lebanese families since the late nineteenth century.<sup>131</sup> Among the Lebanese who immigrated to America at the turn of the twentieth century was the celebrated poet Gibran Khalil Gibran. The outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, and subsequent violent intervals, provoked an enormous diaspora of Lebanese, especially Christians, who immigrated to other Arab countries, the Americas, Europe, and Africa.

In the early 1970s, Khoury-Ghata left Lebanon for France to accompany her second husband. In this manner, the poem’s depiction of immigration to the Occident, be that it may in the context of folktale and fable, reflects both personal and collective experiences. Khoury-Ghata’s poeticization of the emigrant experience recalls what André Jolles defined as “gestes”: “Celles-ci, quelles que soit leur origine nationale ou ethnique, évoquent les grandes migrations ethniques comme une affaire de famille.”<sup>132</sup> The absence in this poem of a precise reference to Lebanon reflects the poet’s adherence to the universal dimension of folktale and fable narratives and supports a broader interpretation of the theme of immigration to America.

With regard to the relationship between “mythe” and “conte,” Walter indicates that both Propp and Mircea Eliade emphasize the significance of rites of initiation in the “conte” (62). Drawing on Eliade’s assessment of the “conte” as a “camouflage des

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<sup>131</sup> Statistics vary, but the consensus is that the number of Lebanese who live outside of Lebanon exceeds the population in Lebanon, estimated to be less than 4 million.

<sup>132</sup> Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*. 88.

motifs et des personnages mythiques," he asserts: "Le conte merveilleux est sans doute devenu, très tôt, un doublet du mythe et du rite initiatique. Il réactualise les épreuves initiatiques, au niveau imaginaire et onirique" (62).

Indeed, this poem represents, first and foremost, an initiation into the experience of loss, which manifests itself in multiple ways. Initiation is introduced in the poem's first couplet, which announces the departure of a cherry tree for America, an event that neatly corresponds with the first narrative function of the hero proposed by Propp in Morphologie du conte: "un des membres de la famille s'éloigne de la maison," from which a derived corollary states: "il partit dans les pays étrangers" (36).

The cherry tree's departure for America precipitates the representation throughout the poem of a series of losses and laments on the part of those left behind: the cherry tree's shadow, which is left behind, languishes; the mother regrets having lost the tree trunk as a hitching post for the donkey; the mother also mourns the death of a child; the grandfather has lost his glasses; Nina is heartsick; a pomegranate tree laments the absence of a minaret in America; and the donkey is sold to the postman. Moreover, the cherry tree, having established a new life in America, expresses in his correspondence with the father the anguish of being homesick. His abandonment of the domestic sphere, which suggests both an initiation and a transgression, clearly produces negative consequences for the collective (tribe).

Apart from the depiction of displacement, absence, and death, loss is also symbolized in the poem by effacement, disappearance, and shrinkage: the shadow, consumed by love, shrinks to a spot; snow melts in astonishment and erases the earth's



surface, kittens disappear in a well, the imprint of a child on the water's surface is erased, and the moon loses blood. Loss is thus represented as a universal experience shared by humans, animals, plants, and cosmic figures alike.

### Binary Structures

#### Questions and Responses

André Jolles proposes one of the most fundamental binary structures of myth: “Quand l’univers se crée ainsi à l’homme par question et par réponse, une forme prend place, que nous appellerons mythe” (Brunel, Mythocritique 19). The binary structure of question and response provides a framework for this poem, which integrates into verse nine interrogative sentences, whose punctuation marks are among the few used in the text. However, only a few questions solicit a response. In the first couplet, having established the cherry tree's departure for America, the poem's first question is posed in the second couplet: “A quoi attacherons-nous l’âne demanda la mère / à l’ombre de son tronc répondit le père” (125). The mother's practical inquisitiveness followed by the father's absurd, or perhaps ironic, response sets the tone for the strange events to follow. Moreover, the depiction at the beginning of the poem of a couple whose destiny is determined by a fruit tree resembles the mythical triangle of Adam, Eve, and the Tree of Life. The poet thus situates the origins of speech - question and response – in a narrative context evocative of the Genesis.

Eight more questions using various interrogative forms – “pourquoi, où, quel, que” – punctuate the poem, creating a chain of queries. One question ponders the origins

of sorrow: “où prennent source les larmes?” (125), which addresses no one in particular. Nina addresses her query to rivers: “quel temps fait-t-il à la source?” (126). Some questions solicit answers: “A quoi sert la neige? / à effacer la terre pour la réécrire correctement” (125). Others do not: “pourquoi le vent n’a-t-il pas de maison?” (130).

Mother and Nina, together, pose the most questions, thus suggesting that women are more curious than other creatures. The cherry tree, the pomegranate tree, the wind, and the door also pose questions. “Où vas-tu comme ça? / a demandé la porte à la mère” (130). In contrast, the father does not pose any questions; rather, as we observed earlier, he responds to the mother’s first query, one of the rare occasions when a question solicits an answer. The poem’s final three verses redress the mother’s initial question, which is marginally transformed: “A quoi attacherons-nous l’ombre maintenant que nous n’avons plus ni âne ni cerisier? demande la mère” (133). The poem thus returns full circle; however, the mother poses the final question in the present tense and in the form of a double negative, which reflects the logic of the antiphrasis in the mystical structure of Durand’s nocturnal order. The accentuation of the negative form and the absence of a response at the poem’s conclusion suggest that there is no solution to the dilemma of absence and no way out of the cycle of loss.

This interrogative cycle contributes to the poem’s construction of a circular narrative, which recalls Kristeva’s notion of women’s time as well as Durand’s synthetic structures, which link cyclical events to symbols affiliated with the feminine figure, such as the moon and the wheel (“la roue”). In this poem, the circular narrative is reinforced by the representation of circular forms and movements, which include women stirring

soup “en cercles clos,” “rond comme un pain cuit entre deux pierres,” the wind working “en cercles fermés,” and the gardener turning “autour son balai”. Even the poem’s title, “Variations autour d’un cerisier” evokes the circular theme.

The poem’s circular movement is also supported by a lexicon expressing repetitive gestures, retrieval, return, and reversal: pebbles launched into the sky “revinrent enrobés de leur bruit”; a drowned child “remonte à la surface”; Grandfather “récapitule son rêve à l’envers pour retrouver ses lunettes”; the mother intends to “ramener la maison à la maison”, les femmes “relèvent leurs jupes”. While the cycle of interrogative forms alludes to the incomprehensibility and irreparability of loss, the tireless evocation of recurrence, retrieval, and reversal proposes the possibility of recovering what is lost.

This dynamic of loss and recovery also shows an affinity with the mythical theme of the Eternal Return, which evokes the myth of Tammuz. Durand notes: “Le très ancien mythe de la souffrance, de la mort et de la résurrection de Tammuz trouve des échos dans le monde paléo-oriental” (339). Our examination in a preceding chapter of Arab influences on Khoury-Ghata’s poetry observed that twentieth-century Arab poets, known as Tammuzian poets, were inspired by this myth. Durand also situates in the context of the synthetic structure’s archetype, “le Fils”: “Tel apparaît le Christ, comme Osiris ou Tammuz, tel aussi le 'Rédempteur de la Nature' des préromantiques et du romantisme” (344). According to Durand’s account, Tammuz is condemned to death and banished to the underworld due to his incestuous relationship with his mother, Ishtar. The world goes into mourning while Ishtar descends to retrieve him. The tree functions as a symbol of

Tammuz's resurrection (345). Although Khoury-Ghata's poem does not suggest any incident of incest, its representation of loss and recovery, precipitated by the Cherry Tree's move to America, the antithesis of home, is highly evocative of the related narratives of "le Fils" and Tammuz.

### The Double

The motif of the double represents another binary system in this poem. Many of the poem's principal and secondary characters share qualities or a relationship. As suggested by the poem's title, "Variations autour d'un cerisier," the cherry tree sustains a variety of relationships. The cherry tree, in its role as a principal male figure, has four doubles: the shadow left behind, the "rich lady Cherry Tree" proposed as the tree's future spouse, the pomegranate tree that echoes the cherry tree's sentiment of homesickness, and the father who functions as the cherry tree's epistolary partner. While the cherry tree is rich in doubles, he remains the most isolated and unhappy character.

Nina functions both as a young double of the mother and as the heartsick double of the shadow. She emulates the mother by posing a question and stirs soup like mothers collectively do. Their common reproductive function is highlighted when the mother demands that Nina try on "un bébé de laine" that she has knitted. However, unlike the mother, Nina's youthful sensuality is on display. Under the influence of the moon, she shaves "l'herbe blonde de ses aisselles", and the father claims in a letter to the cherry tree that Nina is "amoureuse jusqu'aux yeux". Other examples of doubles include the family donkey and its counterpart, a horse in America, as well as a child, who shares with kittens

the fate of drowning in a well.

The motif of the double is reinforced by the repetition of particular words and expressions that contribute to the poem's rhythm. The cherry tree's lament in America resembles a sad refrain. His regret: "j'aurais dû porter mon ombre avec moi" is transformed several verses later into self-examination: "pourquoi n'ai-je pas emporté mon ombre" (128). Other verses produce a compelling juxtaposition. For example, a criticism of American men, who "taillent leurs cyprès comme des crayons", evolves into admiration for the Prophet Mahomet, who "a taillé le cyprès à papier" (131). Mother's wisdom hints at parallel worlds: "après l'horizon il y a un autre horizon" (127). On another occasion, her gesture of mourning requires that she go "ramener la maison à la maison pour la fin du deuil" (130).

Simple oppositions, a common characteristic of the folktale, support the binary paradigm. They include, among others, mother and father, sister and brother, cat and dog, high and low. Cherry tree complains: "je suis seul à droite / seul à gauche" (128). Men in America "écrivent leurs enfants au nord / leurs fenêtres au sud" (129). While the sun is ominously depicted as "épineux" and casting shadow, the moon is represented as producing positive effects: "Les sept lunes de la semaine sont les amies de la maison" (131). Under the moon's influence, the mother sweetens boiling milk with cinnamon and the gardener waxes lyrical about the Muslim prophet: "La lune, dit-il, est lucarne de Mahomet" (131). As we have already observed, the moon, which is affiliated with the feminine figure, is the supreme celestial figure in the nocturnal order. In contrast, the sun is often portrayed as an oppressive masculine figure in Khoury-Ghata's poetry.

## Orality and Writing

The juxtaposition of orality and writing is critical to the poem's representation of a binary system. This serves as an example of Kristeva's construction of poetic language, which distinguishes between the drives generated by the semiotic (rhythm, gestures, intonation, colors), and the counter forces of the symbolic, linked to social structure and the law. They are associated with the maternal and the paternal respectively. Referring to another dichotomy, Henri Meschonnic explains in Les Etats de la poétique the ethnological assignment of different functions to orality and writing. "L'écriture appartenait au paradigme du civilisé, du logique. L'oralité était du côté de l'archaïque, de l'exotisme, de la mentalité pré-logique."<sup>133</sup>

Drawing upon the notions of Kristeva and Meschonnic, we will determine how this poem's structure juxtaposes the relationship between orality, the archaic, and the maternal on the one hand, and writing, the civilized, and the paternal on the other. The first representation of orality, which also establishes the link between orality and the maternal, appears in the poem's second couplet, where the mother, poses the first question: "A quoi attacherons-nous l'âne?" Human and anthropomorphic figures who are represented as speaking (present tense) or having spoken (past tense), also include: Nina, the grandfather, the father, the cherry and pomegranate trees, the gardener, children, the cat, the wind, and the door. There are no quotation marks to signify utterances, which tend to be brief and expressed by simple verbs such as "demander,"

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<sup>133</sup> Henri Meschonnic. Les Etats de la poétique. (Paris: PUF. 1985) 122.

“répondre,” “dire,” “s’interroger,” and “répéter.” The voice of the mother, who utters the first and last words in interrogative forms, as well as that of Nina, are evoked most often, whereas the father and the cherry tree are primarily represented as expressing themselves in epistolary exchanges: “Nous plions ton ombre le soir écrit le père à Cerisier” (127). Thus, the privileged expression of each gender is evident: the women of the family favor oral expression, whereas the men prefer the written word.

The mother’s questions and statements are threaded into the verses from start to finish. Her oral expressions are varied and engage multiple interlocutors. Having questioned the cherry tree’s departure in the first four verses, the mother broaches the topic of death in the twelfth verse: “La pluie n’est plus la même depuis la mort du petit frère” (125). Unlike other family members, the mother employs imperatives. She instructs Nina to “try on” a baby that she’s knitted and orders no one in particular to give her scissors “pour couper les cheveux du camphrier” (131). The mother directly addresses the dead child: “Tu as bien vieilli”; whereas, the father only refers to the child in the past tense: “des vents contraires ont raturé l’enfant” (130). When the door asks her where she’s going she replies: “ramener la maison à la maison pour la fin du deuil”. The predominance of the mother’s voice and her verbal engagement on different levels, i.e. with family members, the living and the dead, human and inanimate, promotes her role as a superior communicative figure.

Other characters are represented as speaking only once and their utterances suggest that they are talking to themselves. For instance, grandfather offers some amusing wisdom in the context of the nocturnal: “il dit: / fermer les yeux ne change en

rien ce qui se passe dans le noir” (127). The initial question and response that takes place between the mother and father represents the only spoken exchange between two human figures. The lack of dialogue between characters reinforces the themes of loss and absence.

Orality is accentuated in another provocative way. In Khoury-Ghata’s poem, numerous references to food preparation and consumption represent the “primitive orality” proposed by Bettelheim in his famous study of fairytales, as well as a pre-oedipal drive of Kristeva’s poetic language and a digestive reflex of Durand’s mystical structures. The introduction of the cherry tree immediately projects an image of sweet, dark red fruit, as does the appearance of a pomegranate tree in subsequent verses. The cherry tree’s shadow “se consume d’amour pour l’arbre absent” (125). There are numerous references to food preparation: women stir soup; they use red-colored spices like cumin and cinnamon; Nina threads peppers; a cat plucks a hen. Milk, primary source of the maternal, is evoked four times in the poem. Nina leans on a jar “pour empêcher le lait de tourner,” while the cat is laden with “lait inutile”. Birds eat cherry pits and throw away the pulp, and dogs are seen lapping the moon’s blood. Their respective consumption of fruit and blood suggests that someone’s loss is someone else’s gain. The color red intrinsic to cherry, pomegranate, spices, peppers, and blood, and the color of the letter that the postman will deliver, symbolizes vitality and fecundity on one hand, and fatality and violence on the other.

The representation of orality juxtaposes that of writing. While the voices of the mother, Nina, and other characters weave through the narrative from beginning to end,



the correspondence between the father and the cherry tree recounted in the middle of the poem anchors the narrative. Implicit and explicit acts of writing are abundant. The snow will “réécrire” the earth. The father marks his territory by tracing the contours of the sun’s shadow “avec un bâton qu’il plante au milieu du cercle” (127). As the poem draws to a close, the patriarch’s violent temper precipitates the destruction of an inkwell: “la colère du père renverse la maison / personne ne ramasse les débris de l’encrier” (132). We have observed that Khoury-Ghata represents this familial scene in other poetry and novels. Pencils are depicted as male figures. The cherry tree explains that American men sleep standing up “comme les crayons / comme les chevaux”. They also “écrivent leurs enfants au nord / leurs fenêtres au sud / dessinent Dieu de droite à gauche comme le désert” (129). Moreover, the postman, by virtue of delivering the cherry tree’s letters to the family, links the two male correspondents, one to another.

Two characters representing Muslim men are affiliated with the act of writing. The pomegranate tree, personifying a male figure, laments the absence of a minaret in America: “que dessine-t-on dans les pays qui n’ont pas de minaret?” (128). According to the gardener, the Prophet “Mahomet” “a taillé le cyprès en crayon à papier / lui qui a ordonné au papyrus d’écrire le livre des morts” (131). These verses thus suggest a link between the male performance of writing (“dessiner,” “tailler,” “écrire”) and Islam, whose Holy Book, the Quran, is believed to represent God’s direct transmission to the Prophet Mohammad. The language of the Quran is the traditional source of written standard Arabic, characterized as a fixed structure. In comparison, spoken Arabic is represented by numerous dialects and manifests the dynamics of a more flexible system.

The images of real and metaphorical tracing instruments and writing tools, such as sticks, pencils, trees, minarets, and the implied linear movement of writing, all of which are associated almost exclusively with male figures, stand in opposition to the circles and cycles evoked by the activity of feminine figures, such as the mothers, who stir “en cercles clos” and “des vents femelles”, who take refuge in hedges. In a more ominous vein, children tracing a circle around the cherry tree’s foot, declare: “Voici ta prison” (129). Writing is thus represented as a means of proscription.

### Life and Death

The poem laments more than the departure of the cherry tree. Death is intricately woven into many of the verses, so that the deceased are mourned just as much as the cherry tree gone to America. While the father and Cherry Tree are preoccupied with writing, the mother is busy with the dual tasks of mourning and housework: “ramener la maison à la maison pour la fin du deuil” (130). The mother maintains a privileged relationship with the dead. As the first family member to interrogate the significance of the cherry tree’s departure, she is also the first to broach the subject of death when she laments: “La pluie n’est plus la même depuis la mort du petit frère”. One verse depicts the mother’s burial of the child as an act of regeneration: “Le soleil était épineux lorsque la mère planta l’enfant dans la terre de retour chez elle” (126).

Subsequent verses reveal the porosity of the frontiers between life and death: “La mère range les billes par ordre de taille et de tristesse/ l’enfant jouera quand il sera moins mort” (127). She communicates with the dead child: “Tu as bien vieilli [...] ton berceau a

rejoint la forêt” (129). The dead child, “un petit noyé” remains attached to the maternal by “cette odeur laiteuse de vagues” (127). The dead participate in domestic activities in the mother’s domain. “Les enfants morts n’ont qu’à se mettre à table / les mains transies feront la vaisselle” (126). Having turned out the lights, they will leave “dans un froissement d’ailes,” which suggests the company of angels.

Death is not exclusively linked to the mother and child. Verses depict the cemetery as a gathering place where life and death mingle. A wedding sheet “flottait au-dessus du cimetière” (130). Father implies in his letter to Cherry Tree that Grandfather, whose preoccupations are sleeping and dreaming, stayed up all night, because “il y avait réception au cimetière et porte ouverte à l’étang” (131). Although, death brings mourning, it is not something to be feared; rather, it is domesticated. This reflects Khoury-Ghata's principal strategy of erasing the frontiers between life and death. “Il y a un espace de vie dans la mort,” insists the poet (Stout 310).

### Orient and Occident

The cherry tree’s letter, symbolizing the heart of the story, offers a critique of America, where his name “le cerisier” has been abbreviated in an American way to “Cerisier.” Cherry Tree has made his fortune, the evidence of which lies in his letter carrying the weight “d’abondance et de prospérité.” However, lonely Cherry Tree remains unable to enjoy the fruits of his success: “je suis seul à droite / seul à gauche”. Most of all, he misses the shadow that he left behind and reprimands himself: "j’aurais dû emporter mon ombre avec moi" (128). Moreover, Cherry Tree appears to be suffering

from culture shock, because he recounts the strange habits of American men, who sleep standing up “comme les crayons / comme les chevaux”. He seems disoriented by the ever mobile Americans who “écrivent leurs enfants au nord / leur fenêtres au sud / dessinent Dieu de droite à gauche comme le désert” (129).

Cherry Tree’s solitude and wealth juxtapose the collective and simple life of the family left behind, represented by the ironic yet comforting declaration: “nous sommes riches de quatre murs” (132). Indeed, the contrast between the lonely individualistic lifestyle of Cherry Tree in America and the community of his origins is reinforced by the tree’s preoccupation with himself, expressed by his frequent use of first person singular, “j’aurais dû emporter mon ombre [...] je suis seul [...] j’ai dessiné une invasion d’herbes silencieuses” (128). In contrast the poem’s first verse depicts the cherry tree’s departure as affecting the collective: “Le cerisier nous fit les adieux”. In addition, the father uses first person plural in his letters: “Nous plions ton ombre le soir [...] nous la rangeons près de la chatte qui a mis bas”. Finally, the mother’s use of the first person plural in her first and last questions: “A quoi attacherons-nous.(...)”, accentuates her fundamental role as the matriarch of the community (tribe).

### Compensating for Loss

The sentiment of loss pervades the poem; nevertheless, there are occasional representations of compensatory activities, such as love, procreation, and generation. While the shadow is consumed with love for the departed cherry tree, a cat reckons that the cherry tree, now prosperous in America, will marry “une riche Cerisière”. The father

writes that Nina is “amoureuse jusqu’aux yeux / c’est visible à sa manière d’enfiler les poivrons comme des baisers (131). As if to recreate the lost child, whose cradle “a rejoint la forêt”, the mother knits “un bébé de laine long comme l’année”, which she asks Nina to try it on: “pour savoir s’il a la forme de ton étreinte” (130). As is often the case in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry and novels, women’s tasks of threading and knitting allude to their archetypal roles as weavers of fabric and stories, and whose domestic and verbal skills maintain the community and its traditions.

The father informs Cherry Tree that the cat has had kittens and, in a subsequent letter, implies that Grandfather is spending evenings socializing at the cemetery: “il paraît que les âmes égarées et les insectes prolifèrent dans l’eau inerte” (131). These implicit and explicit references to the compulsive desire to procreate, whether it concerns human, animal, spirit, or insect, serve to mitigate, but not vanquish the accumulating effects of loss.

Unlike most folktales and fables that provide the reader with tidy resolutions, this poem does not tie up loose ends. In fact, the sole, and somewhat comic, recovery of a lost object is represented in the middle of the poem by the grandfather’s finding the glasses, which he had lost in his sleep, in the henhouse. As for the mother, who has the last word and signifies the last word of the poem, she speaks for the entire community in her relentless search for answers in a universe of loss: “A quoi attacherons nous l’ombre maintenant que nous n’avons plus / ni âne ni cerisier? / demande la mère” (133).



## Chapter 6

### Mediating Figures: Fantastic Heroines and Fallen Heroes

#### Introduction

The study of poetry engenders “une intensification des travaux consacrés à l’analyse des figures mythiques,” proposes Dominique Viart, who marvels at the diversity, plurality, and dynamics of “figuration” in contemporary Francophone poetry (9-10). The Greeks used myth to express “l’altérité, la différence, l’étrange, le scandaleux,” asserts Véronique Gély, who attributes the “sujet lyrique” with a history of adapting myth “pour tenter de se définir en ses métamorphoses et en ses divisions” (49).<sup>134</sup> Similarly highlighting the notions of difference and metamorphosis, Jean-Marc Moura defines myth as that which renders alterity “re-figurable” (213).

The malleability of myth appears to stand in contrast with the notion of archetype as a fixed form. Having defied criticism of his conception of “l’inconscient collectif” as a unifying structure, Jung remains a fundamental reference in the discourse on archetype, according to Stanislaw Jasionowicz’s essay “Archétype” in Questions de mythocritique. (27-40). Freud, Eliade, and Lévi-Strauss also exercise an enduring influence, in addition to Bachelard and Durand, who insist on the central role of the “imaginaire”: “(...) les archétypes deviennent visibles dans les productions de l’imagination et c’est là que la notion d’archétype trouve son application spécifique” (32).

Reconciling various conceptions of archetype, Jasionowicz proposes a

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<sup>134</sup> Gély, "Les sexes de la mythologie, mythes, littérature et gender," 49.

contemporary definition: “les archétypes apparaissent comme des ‘organismes imaginaires signifiants’ et où l’imagination archétypale permet de ‘participer à la vérité du monde’, à chaque fois actualisée au niveau individuel de l’existence de chaque humain et, au niveau collectif, celui du destin commun des sociétés et de l’humanité tout entière” (37). This generous formulation of archetype, which takes into account individual and collective conceptions, suggests that figures in the context of myth evolve from a complex matrix of constants and variables.

Our analysis of the poem “Les mots” has already demonstrated how Khoury-Ghata’s representation of figures not only expresses otherness and strangeness in the context of myth, but also reflects universal archetypes and symbols. Our examination of the poem “Orties” showed that Khoury-Ghata’s figures represent more than the anguish of one specific individual or family in a unique socio-historical context, they evoke a collective dimension of tragedy, especially the female figure’s response to it. We have also observed how the maternal figure occupies a significant position in Khoury-Ghata’s poetic landscape. In this vein, we will now focus on the poet’s representation of the female figure, which inspires my dissertation’s overarching theme of myth and the maternal voice. With the objective of constructing a more comprehensive evaluation of figures, we will subsequently examine the male figure that is often portrayed in juxtaposition to its female counterpart.

#### Female Figure: Grande Déesse

Khoury-Ghata’s poetry from Terres stagnantes (1969) to Les Obscurcis (2008)



highlights the female figure's sexual, reproductive, and domestic functions. This representation corresponds convincingly to archetypes, themes, and symbols of Durand's nocturnal order, especially its subordinate mystical structures, in which archetypal feminine figures, known as "Grandes Déeses," replace the archetypal masculine figure, exemplified by the "Grand Souverain" of the "diurnal order." These supreme female goddesses, who evoke the archetypes of "la femme," "la mère," and "la demeure," assume the benevolent roles of "protectrices du foyer" and "donneuses de maternité" (226). Their roles reflect the nocturnal yearning for "le retour à la mère" and "la quête du repos et de l'intimité," as well as "la valorisation de la mort" (219-222).<sup>135</sup>

While the publication of Durand's study (1960) predates feminist discourse on myth, which emerged in force in the 1970s, and with all due respect to Simone de Beauvoir's critique of myth as that which is nothing but "le reflet des fantasmes, des rêves des hommes qui les créent" in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), Wendy Faris' discussion of the feminine in the contemporary magical realist novel serves as an interesting supplement to Durand's analysis.<sup>136</sup> Supported by discourse affiliated with eminent theorists of the 'feminine' like Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Faris identifies in magical realist texts what have become conventional, but sometimes contested, markers of the feminine: the incorporation into the narrative of polyvocality, hybridity,

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<sup>135</sup> Reviewing the classification system of mystical structures, we note the emphasis on "persévération, viscosité, réalisme sensorial, mise en miniature," and a proclivity for fusion. Archetypes include "la nourriture," "la substance," and "le microcosme." Symbols of intimacy include "le ventre," "avaleurs et avalés," "le voile," and "la tombe." Finally, the antiphrasis and euphemism exemplify the logic of mystical structures.

<sup>136</sup> Faris, "Women and Women and Women".

multifaceted subjectivity, the irrational, the unconscious, and the maternal, as well as the promotion of collective and communal aspirations. Identifiers, such as the irrational and the unconscious, jibe particularly well with surrealist impulses. Faris demonstrates how magical realist narratives represent the remystification of the female figure in the domestic sphere. Her description of the empowerment of female protagonists via traditional domestic skills, like cooking, evokes in no small measure the domestic role of Durand's "Grandes Déesses." Our examination of Khoury-Ghata's poetry indeed suggests that her feminine figures resemble the heroines of the contemporary magical realist novel.<sup>137</sup>

This examination will acknowledge the usefulness and validity of the nocturnal structures postulated by Durand and, to a lesser extent, the magical realist application proposed by Faris, while demonstrating some of the limitations of their approaches. Durand implies that the nocturnal mystical experience engenders subliminal pleasures. Similarly, Faris, who links domesticity to a mystical experience, focuses on the magical realist female protagonist's achievement of rapture. In contrast, Khoury-Ghata's poetry, however nocturnal, consistently suggests the illusiveness of pleasure or ecstasy for the domestic female figure, whose "mystical" experiences in the domestic sphere contribute to the survival of the collective, rather than the realization of pleasure, or the achievement of personal satisfaction. One explanation for the persistent despair in Khoury-Ghata's

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<sup>137</sup> Khoury-Ghata's novels, *La Maestra* and *Privilège des morts*, serve as convincing models of magical realist strategies, which include the absence of hierarchy between the real and the fantastic, the resuscitation of myth, links with nature, the use of metamorphosis as a common event, the promotion of ancient systems of belief and local lore in a rural setting, and the advocacy of community. See Faris' article "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction" in *Magical Realism*. Eds. Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 163-190.

representation lies in Julia Kristeva's notion of motherhood: "a mother is always branded by pain, she yields to it."<sup>138</sup> On the other hand, the sorrow manifested by Khoury-Ghata's female figures does not exclusively represent their response to the status of motherhood; it also signifies a response to hardships shaped by external events, such as death and war.

Our examination of verses from numerous collections of poetry, Mon Anthologie, Anthologie personnelle, Compassion des pierres, Elle dit, and Les Obscurcis, supplemented by references to some of her novels, will demonstrate how Khoury-Ghata's representation of the female figure, especially in the context of nocturnal mythical structures, archetypes, and symbols, transforms the village housewife and mother into a heroine of mythical proportions. She is portrayed as a self-sacrificing figure that reigns over a domestic domain situated between the ordinary and extraordinary, as well as the profane and the sacred. Her body, gestures, and voice function as instruments of mediation that contribute to collective values, reconcile cosmic forces, and rehabilitate death. Her efforts serve to repair and regenerate a fractured universe. Moreover, the poet's portraits of the mother and widow, in particular, propose an inversion of the myth, Demeter and Persephone, as well as an interpretation of Ishtar and Tammuz and Isis and Osiris. The domestic female figure, especially the mother, whose presence and voice have been heretofore relegated to the margins of French poetry, is vindicated in Khoury-

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<sup>138</sup> Ewa Ziarek, "At the Limits of Discourse, Heterogeneity, Alterity, and the Maternal in Kristeva's Thought," Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy. 107. Patricia J. Huntington's Ecstatic Subjects, Utopia and Recognition (New York: SUNY Press, 1998) distinguishes between the ecstatic and the cathartic, in that one represents an awareness of the "social processes involved" in constructing a desiring identity while the other represents an "uncritical transgression that eroticizes pleasure".

Ghata's verse.

### Female body

In Vénus Khoury-Ghata's poetry, the depiction of certain body parts accentuates the female figure's sexual, reproductive, and domestic roles. Fragmented and enigmatic images of the feminine body convey a surrealist approach that favors overdetermining particular parts of the female body on one hand, while maintaining its enigmatic qualities on the other. While the portrait of the female figure, even that of the maternal figure, which is inspired by the poet's own mother, does not entirely avoid the sensual and the erotic, the rare and parsimonious use of detail suggests restraint on the part of Khoury-Ghata, whose images normally incline toward excess. Moreover, an examination of verses clearly demonstrates that the female body's engagement in domestic tasks, more than its esthetic and erotic qualities, defines Khoury-Ghata's portrait of the female figure.

Verses reveal a modest range of traits that pay homage to noble as well as base parts of the body. Similar to the male surrealist portrayal of the "femme végétale," facial attributes, such as the eyes and lips, are compared to natural phenomena in Khoury-Ghata's picaresque representation of a village community in "Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse" (Elle dit). One village spouse is characterized as having "des oreilles aussi tendres que feuilles / de vigne sous la tonnelle / un cou aussi souple que feuille de seringa au soleil" (85). Another woman has enigmatic eyes in which "se mélangeaient les épices et les fumées" (79).

The hand represents one of the most critical parts of the female body in Khoury-

Ghata's poetry, because it is essential to the execution of domestic chores. The portrait of the poet's mother in "Orties" illustrates how hands, often represented in traditional poetry as attributes of feminine youth and beauty, are transformed into the working tools of a mature woman: "Une vieille femme pliée jusqu'au sol arrache à mains nues / l'ortie qui a poussé sur la page puis la lance dans la marge" (Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits, 10). The same poem goes on to describe the mother as having "une serpillière dans une main / sa dignité dans l'autre" (24), thus linking the woman's humble domestic task to her own noble sense of worth. Clearly mirroring the portrait of her mother, the poet subsequently writes about her own hands by giving equal value to her own tasks, gardening and writing: "Le râteau dans une main / le crayon dans l'autre / je dessine un parterre" (25).

The poem's concluding verses compare the generational transmission of language to a familiar hand gesture which is passed from mother to daughter: "les mots de ma langue maternelle me saluent de la main / je les déplace avec lenteur comme elle le faisait de ses ustensiles de cuisine / marmite écuelle louche bassine ont voyagé de mains en mains" (27). Thus, words from the mother tongue, like handed-down kitchen utensils, are carefully arranged and preserved for future generations. The hand also signifies the tactile and compassionate aspects of the female figure. Hands are the mother's instruments of consolation: "Elle applique ses mains sur celles du pommier pour éprouver / sa résistance au chagrin" (Elle dit 37). In other verses, hands tousle children's hair, knit clothes for the needy, mend furniture, wring out laundry, scrub walls, and stir soup. Instruments of mediation, hands serve as a metaphor of terrestrial-celestial fusion: "les

mains de la femme sont deux pigeons de pierre” (51).

### Ventre ambivalent

The imagination of the nocturnal system assigns the body a positive role, according to Durand. Its sexual, gynecological, and digestive functions are positively affiliated with the warmth, slowness, and intimacy of “rêves de descente et de retour.” This is antithetical to the diurnal system, which assigns a negative value to the body and sanctions the same functions. The nocturnal system values “le ventre” as “le symbole hédonique de la descente heureuse, libidineusement sexuelle et digestive à la fois” (229). Indeed, Khoury-Ghata’s poetry accentuates the sexual and reproductive roles of the female body in a constellation of nocturnal symbols affiliated with the intimacy of a warm enclosure; however, the pleasure implied in Durand’s expression, “descente heureuse,” is markedly absent. Rather, the female figure’s sexual and reproductive functions are consistently portrayed in the context of sorrow, pain, and even death. This representation of the female figure indicates the limited scope of Durand’s approach, whose study of the nocturnal is supported exclusively by references to male writers, for whom descent and penetration may represent decidedly different experiences than those of women.

The link between Eros and Thanatos is already evident in Khoury-Ghata’s early poetry collection “Les Ombres et leurs cris” (Mon Anthologie). Addressing the somber consequences of civil war in Lebanon, these verses evoke a disturbing striptease of the flesh by a female figure on her threshold:

Et la femme ouverte sur la pierre de sa porte  
 la femme rouge à ses multiples lèvres  
 la femme herbeuse dans sa pénombre

ôte sa peau  
 s'étreint  
 puis s'ébroue dans l'écume de son corps (54)

Two decades later, in a more peaceful time in Lebanon, "Miroirs transis"

(Compassion des pierres), reveals a less violent, but still disturbing, image of the female

torso:

Une brique sous chaque aisselle elle s'enfonce dans la pluie  
 le khôl autour de ses yeux la protège des éblouissements  
 le gel durcit la pointe de ses seins  
 Elle lave le fleuve lave son ventre sourde aux cris des abeilles et du pain  
 (38)

Aquatic metaphors produce a soft erotic quality rendered ambivalent by the female body's hardened defensive posture, signified by the brick under each armpit, the protective function of the kohl around her eyes, the gel hardening the tip of her breasts and, finally, the allusion to her deafness.

As the previous verse demonstrates, the "ventre" (abdomen) is a fundamental symbol of woman's sexual and reproductive functions. The picaresque portrait of an Arab village in "Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse" depicts sexual tension in the context of masculine fantasies. Reflecting the nocturnal system's fusion of sexual and digestive impulses, these verses demonstrate how the female body stimulates masculine fantasies of feasts, both sacred and profane:

Le mendiant Rassoul salive jusqu'à terre à la vue de Laouza  
 son ventre est un pain blanc béni par l'archevêque  
 son nombril une cerise picorée par les merles (Elle dit 82)

The "aisselle" (underarm) of a certain Rachel entrances the milkman who considers it, "si velue que son âne pourrait brouter ses aisselles pendant que lui-même tirerait / des coups de feu en mangeant du lupin" (80). These metaphors juxtapose the violence of male sexual fantasies, on one hand, and harmless domesticity, symbolized by fruit, birds, a donkey, and lupine, on the other. Latent violence is also evident in the portrait of a woman named Khaoula, whose hyperbolic attributes incarnate the cool and explosive qualities of mineral:

les cuisses marmoréennes  
  
 les seins volcaniques  
 et un entrejambe de maréchal des logis avec des poils aussi  
 drus que des allumettes  
 ("Les Sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse" (Elle dit 88))

The structure of the two preceding sets of verse, whose pattern reveals one body part per verse divides the female figure into segments. The following verses in the poem "Inhumations" function similarly; however they fuse the sexual and digestive in a domestic context. A villager, in the manner of Adam creating Eve, constructs a housewife out of digestible components as if he were following a recipe:

Deux feuilles de menthe pour les yeux



deux grains de café pour les seins  
 deux pétales pour la bouche  
 il les abrite entre ses murs  
 en fait une femme au foyer

The anaphor of “deux” methodically reduces a woman’s body to a binary construction of floral and vegetal fragments, which bring to mind the mystical structures of perseverance and miniaturization. The poem concludes with the man’s declaration: “Voilà ma femme,” suggesting his pride in having concocted such a confection (“Inhumations,” Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 78).

“Le ventre” also represents the locus of the sexual act, during which the male figure marks his territory.

Les draps étaient froids non le halètement de l’homme  
 qui oeuvrait en espace clos ni le cri qui éclaboussa la neige du ventre  
 fracassant son eau rouge  
 liant ma mère à cette maison où elle se souvient  
 (“Basse enfance,” Anthologie personnelle 30)

In contrast with the panting male who remains unidentified, the female figure manifests indifference suggested by her appearance in the text several verses later, where she is identified as “my mother”. The figurative distance separating the couple is reinforced by the description of his “[working] in a closed space” – as well as the coolness of the sheets, the cold white snow of her abdomen, and the violence of “her red water”. However, the female figure is not always portrayed as a passive recipient. In the following verse, she says no to the masculine figure, personified by a tree: “Elle dit non

au platane qui réclame son humus / et dessina jadis le même vertige sur son ventre et sur l'aubier / liant son sort à celui de la forêt" ("Elle dit," Elle dit 28). The verb "lier" in the two aforementioned examples, evoking the synthetic structures' theme "relier," implies that the female figure's sexuality is linked, not to the male lover, but rather to the structure of the domicile on one hand, and to the community of the "forest" on the other. In other words, her sexuality is prescribed by domestic and collective roles, not by a physical or emotional attachment to the male figure.

In the following verses, "genou(x)" replace(s) "ventre" as the critical female body part and the sexual act takes on a decidedly negative tone, represented by the recurrence of the preposition "sans" and the construction "aucun...ne":

Il connaît le corps de sa femme dans ses moindre retraits  
y circule de nuit sans allumer ses yeux  
sans se coincer les doigts entre les côtes  
ou se perdre à l'angle du genou  
où aucun panneau signalisateur n'indique la direction du cœur  
(Mon Anthologie 90).

While the preceding verse alludes to the male figure's nocturnal meanderings, the following one refers to his penetration: "Il va et vient dans la moiteur obscure de ses cavités s'accroche à ses reins dépose ses galets au point d'intersection de ses genoux puis se retire" ("Mirroir transis," Compassion des pierres 78). The abundant use of reflexive verbs in both of these examples, i.e. "se coincer," "se perdre," "s'accrocher," and "se retirer," juxtaposes the male figure as the active subject and the female figure as the passive object. In contrast, "Basse enfance" represents the rare occasion when the

female figure initiates an encounter: [she] “invitait la lune dans son lit / la réchauffait entre ses cuisses / faisait ruisseler son lait” (Anthologie personnelle 38). While the implied feminine gender of the moon, a nocturnal figure, hints at sexual ambivalence, what is most significant here is the female figure’s desire for intimacy with a celestial figure, rather than with a terrestrial figure.

Thus, the sexuality of the female figure is linked to the nocturnal order, particularly the synthetic structures' copulative reflex and theme "relier"; however, her portrait avoids expressing a pleasurable descent. On the contrary, it depicts her as the object of male fantasy and manipulation, the target of latent violence, and the expression of female passivity and rejection. In a similar vein, the female figure’s reproductive function is represented in an ambivalent context in as much as it evokes the mystical structures' theme "confondre," confounding the forces of life and death, Eros and Thanatos. Durand acknowledges the link between “ces deux bornes fatales (...) que sont le sépulcre et le ventre maternel” (274).

The double function of the uterus is explicitly revealed in the following verses: “les accoucheuses s’enduisaient les mains pour arracher les enfants aux ventres des mortes” (“Elle dit,” Elle dit 61). “On l’a trouvée enchaînée au fleuve / ses enfants dans son ventre devenus cailloux (“Miroirs transis”, Compassion des pierres 65). These tragic depictions of pregnancy represent what the poet witnessed while growing up in a traditional rural environment, where women often face the risky task of giving birth without professional medical assistance. Khoury-Ghata recounts in her autobiography, Une Maison au bord des larmes, how a neighbor died during a difficult labor, because her

husband had prohibited the attendance of a male physician:

De larges bassines remplies d'une eau rougeâtre furent versées au pied du grenadier. Sur le seuil de la chambre, le père ivre de fierté montrait son fils à sa famille venue d'un village du sud. A l'entrecuisse de son saroual, un monceau de draps sanglants...Renée s'éteignit en même temps que le réverbère de la rue. Portée par ses quatre frères au cimetière, on dit que le sang continua à couler à l'intérieur du cercueil, étoilant sa robe de mariée (68).

Later in the text, the dead woman will reappear in the narrator's dream as a "Mélusine"-like apparition, undulating like water, and her mouth opening and closing like that of a fish, asking for news about her baby (85). In a more positive vein, verses announce childbirth as an event celebrated by both women and domestic creatures:

“femmes et chattes mettent bas au grand soulagement du / canari qui ébruite les naissances” (“Elle dit,” Elle dit 16).

### Menstrual blood

Explicit and implicit references to menstrual blood in Khoury-Ghata's poetry emphasize the female figure's reproductive function and its governance by the moon. Durand's discussion of the diurnal order underscores the classification of menstrual blood as a taboo, which represents “l'eau néfaste et la féminité inquiétante qu'il faut éviter ou exorciser par tous les moyens” (120). In the same vein, “la tache sanglante” represents impurity and implies a fault or sin, linked to the archetype of “la chute.” “Le sang est redoutable à la fois parce qu'il est maître de la vie et de la mort, mais aussi parce qu'en sa féminité il est la première horloge humaine, le premier signe humain corrélatif du drame

lunaire” (122). As an antithesis of the diurnal order, the nocturnal order usually assigns a positive value to feminine phenomena; however Durand does not offer an alternative interpretation that would rehabilitate the symbolism of menstrual blood, which is perhaps indicative of the inherent difficulty in assigning a positive value to this fundamental feminine condition. Kristeva’s Powers of Horror, which addresses the abject as “an unconscious and conscious threat to one’s own clean and proper self,” proposes that the representation of the abject in literature demonstrates a certain “nocturnal power” (208). In this manner, Khoury-Ghata’s poetry rehabilitates the abject by underscoring a positive aspect of menstrual blood, which is the female solidarity forged by this monthly burden.

Women’s work is linked to this monthly burden shared by other creatures, both cosmic and aerial. In the following verse, their feminine solidarity is emphasized by the poet’s use of the plural pronoun “elles.” Rooftops serve as a meeting place of terrestrial and cosmic forces, whose impurities women labor to remove:

Les travaux mensuels étaient leur lot  
elles frottaient jusqu’à l’usure les toits souillés par les déjections de la lune  
et par les menstrues des cigognes pubères” (“Elle dit” Elle dit 9)

Women’s blood is also evoked by the pomegranate tree, which represents a sympathetic terrestrial figure in Khoury-Ghata’s domestic sphere. The tree’s round red fruit and flowing sap suggest an alliance of blood with the female figure: “sa sympathie allait au grenadier qui saignait sur le mur de la cuisine / ses menstrues lui revenaient par le biais de l’arbre qui la regardait le regarder” (“Orties,” Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 11).

The intimate and taboo qualities of feminine blood are represented by images of multiple enclosures: “La tempête prévue pour ce soir enferme chez elles les femmes qui saignent / la pluie répand leur odeur rouge jusqu’à dimanche et la huche” (Miroirs transis, Compassion des pierres 88). These verses avoid representing the terror of blood evoked in Durand’s diurnal order, but rather allude to the pain and sorrow that bleeding imposes on the female community. Insomniac women “avaient la fiabilité du sang / l’anneau écarlate à leur ventre en faisait les maîtresses de la douleur” (“Elle dit” Elle dit 46).

Our examination of the female body and her sexual and reproductive functions has demonstrated the female figure’s correspondence to archetypes and symbols developed in Durand’s nocturnal order, particularly with regard to mystical structures. Khoury-Ghata’s poetry highlights the female figure’s domestic and maternal roles, the fusion of sexual and digestive functions, and the symbol of the “ventre,” signifying both womb and tomb. However, they also show that contrary to Durand’s representation of a “descente heureuse,” the female figure’s sexual and reproductive experiences are marked by violence and sorrow. Female sexuality and reproduction are principally represented as serving the needs of the male figure, the domicile, the community, and the cosmos. This somber portrayal of selflessness contributes to the female figure’s status as a domestic heroine in Khoury-Ghata's poetry.

#### Female Gestures: Phenomena of Domestic Chores

Having examined the representation of the female body, we will now study the female figure’s gestures in the context of domestic chores. Evoking mythical archetypes

in the domains of “tissage,” “linge,” and “cuisine,” portraits of women practicing extraordinary domestic skills elevate the female figure’s status from ordinary domestic housewife and mother closer to that of a domestic goddess. Images of industriousness promote a feminine work ethic, based on self-sacrificing values of maternity and domesticity, whose objectives are to maintain and mend a universe threatened by fragmentation. Moreover, the female figure’s superior status in the domestic sphere is reinforced by her privileged role as an intermediary figure capable of transgressing spatial and temporal frontiers.

Khoury-Ghata’s obsession with domestic chores reflects a feminine work ethic whose values she underscores in many of her novels and poems. In an autobiographical account, *La Maison aux orties*, she enumerates the daily chores of village women, while drawing a stark contrast between their physically demanding work and her own access in Paris to modern gadgets, like light switches.

Debout sur une terre rocailleuse, ou assises, un bébé tétant leur sein, je retrouvais été après été mes anciennes camarades de jeux, lourdes de grossesses répétées, courant entre âtre et poulailler, ramassant les branches cassées par le vent, les enfournant d’une main preste sous des marmites vêtues de suie, faisant bouillir tout ce qui poussait sur leur lopin de terre [...] Comment convaincre ces fillettes vieilles avant l’âge, aux mains calleuses à force de casser des branches, nourries de pain dur et de fruits âpres en temps de disette, ces raccommodeuses de nuit dont un simple aboiement de chien fait vaciller la flamme de la lampe, que la lumière chez moi s’obtient par la simple pression du doigt sur un commutateur? (14-15).

By comparing the manual labor of writing to cooking and gardening, Khoury-

Ghata attaches herself to the tradition of domestic work and, moreover, suggests that writing and household tasks require identical skills.

La plume dans une main, une cuillère dans l'autre, je touille un potage et corrige un texte en même temps, désherbe une plate-bande tout en cherchant la chute d'un poème, pique un drap tout en renouant le dialogue entre les personnages d'un roman en chantier [...] (28).

Having domesticated the act of writing and appropriated it as a woman's occupation, Khoury-Ghata obliterates the boundaries between two distinct and traditionally incompatible vocations. 'Jardinier, cuisinier ou écrire, c'est le même geste pour moi', confirms the poet in an interview, thus suggesting that the stature of domestic chores is equal to that of writing.

### Tissage

Durand discusses the theme of "tissage" in the construction of the nocturnal order. "La technologie des textiles par le rouet, le fuseau comme par ses produits fils et étoffes est donc dans son ensemble inductrice de pensées unitaires, de rêveries du continu et de la nécessaire fusion des contraires cosmiques" (372). Synthetic structures, whose archetypes include "la lune" and "la roue," underscore the link between "la profession du tisserand" and "déesses séléniques." The synthetic structures' emblematic verb "relier" is fundamental to the activity of "tissage." Durand also insists on the contamination between the themes of the spinner and the weaver, and other symbols represented, for example, by clothing (369). In Khoury-Ghata's verse, the representation of household



linens and garments, as well as feminine activities that portray their fabrication, care, and maintenance, contribute to the portrait of the mythical feminine figure and archetype. The female figure is sometimes exclusively identified by what she wears, such as an apron, dress, or skirt. Feminine garments, like shawls, evoke the nocturnal symbol of “le voile.” Durand remarks, “L'image du somptueux vêtement de la déesse mère est d'ailleurs fort ancienne” (254). Demonstrating the nocturnal rhetoric of inversion, Khoury-Ghata gives prominence to the rustic garments of the humble housewife.

The faded apron is emblematic of the working mother. Having returned from the dead to pull nettles, the mother wipes her forehead “avec le coin de son tablier / geste qui montre l'étendue de sa robe rongée par son séjour sous terre” (“Orties,” Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 11). The odor of an apron allows an elderly man to measure the passage of time: “il faut semer entre deux lunes quand les tabliers des femmes / exhalent une odeur d'orage et de pierre brûlée” (“Elle dit,” Elle dit 56). The apron's service spans that of the mother's life: “Mère de rien du tout / qui traverse les années avec son tablier décoloré” (“Orties,” Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 24).

Like the apron, the clothes of the mother are soiled with use: “la robe de ma mère a bu la neige de novembre” (“Fables pour un peuple d'argile,” Mon Anthologie 199) “Sa robe qui traîne sur dallage est rose de décembre / les souillures masquent un sang d'enfantement ancien” (“Elle dit,” Elle dit 28). Only a red hue, signifying the blood of life and sacrifice, colors women's garments: Le caleçon rouge suspendu à la corde peut s'envoler avec les ballons de la noce maintenant que l'église est fermée” (“Miroirs transis,” Compassion des pierres 37). In a lyrical address to her daughter, Khoury-Ghata

compares her to soft garments: “tu es ma robe de caresses / mon foulard de tendresse / ma ceinture de baiser “ (“Qui parle au nom du jasmin,” Mon Anthologie 111). Fabric thus serves as a symbol of maternal love as well as the female figure’s domestic status. In other verses, women are portrayed as sewing, knitting, mending, washing, drying, ironing, folding and putting away men’s trousers, coats, and baby garments, as well as sheets, tablecloths, and shrouds.

Comparative myth scholars, Gilbert Durand, Pierre Brunel, and Sylvia Ballestra-Puech trace the female figure’s association with “tissage,” to Antiquity. Pierre Brunel’s Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes and Archetypes asserts, “the spinner and her thread represent the most vivid archetypal figures in our imagination” (1063). Having recalled the adage, “la guerre aux hommes, le tissage aux femmes,”<sup>139</sup> Bellestra-Puech also points out in her essay on “Tisseuses” that the representation of spinning and weaving in antiquity is affiliated with extraordinary feminine figures: “Dans l’épopée homérique, le filage et le tissage n’apparaissent jamais comme des activités banales mais bien comme l’apanage de figures féminines qui côtoient le divin, lorsqu’elles ne sont pas des déesses: Hélène dans Illiade, Calypso, Circé et Pénélope dans l’Odyssée mais surtout la Moire dont dépend le destin des héros.(...)” (Dictionnaires des mythes féminins 1829).

Mythical figures include Arachné, who challenges the weaving skills of the goddess Athena. She is consequently transformed into a spider spinning webs.

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<sup>139</sup> Sylvia Ballestra-Puech, “La Toile et le texte: Quelques avatars du mythe d’Arachné dans la fiction contemporaine,” La Dimension mythique de la littérature contemporaine, eds. Ariane Eissen and Jean-Paul Engélibert (2000) 34.

Philomèle, who is raped then rendered mute by her brother-in-law, exposes the violent acts in her weaving. Spinning and weaving consequently appear as powerful feminine skills, whose ambivalence is expressed by their affiliation with both creative and destructive impulses. According to the Dictionnaire des mythes féminins, “le tissage est l’attribut des femmes en tant qu’exclues de la parole et du pouvoir” (1834). Indeed, the solitary female figure in Khoury-Ghata’s poems, often engaged in knitting, sewing, or mending, often seems to represent the excluded, whose handwork remains her primary means of expression.

Ballestra-Puech also underscores weaving’s collective dimension in as much as it creates an image “où se lit le destin humain” (1829). Though evocations of “tissage” are rare in her early poetry, one of Khoury-Ghata’s first poems, “Au sud du silence” uses it as a metaphor to express the tragic fate of refugees in south Lebanon: “Parce que leurs noms étaient trop larges pour leur corps d’étrangers / ils se taillèrent des noms de voyage dans le tissu rêche des chemins” (Anthologie personnelle 166). Integration of names in coarse fabric serves here as a symbol of the refugees’ humble and collective destiny.

Durand identifies a “surdétermination bénéfique du tissu” which, as a symbol of continuity, suggests a “liaison rassurante (...) ce qui ‘rattache’ deux parties séparées” (371). Indeed, the depiction of knitting, sewing, and mending in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry suggests that these feminine activities serve the benevolent purpose of joining together and protecting the collective.

Spinning is relegated to spiders in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry. Evoking “l’imaginaire arachnéen” of surrealism, one such spider spins in tandem with the female figure, who

knits: 'face à l'araignée paisible / sa pelote de laine et la salive de l'insecte se dévident avec la même lenteur' ("Elle dit," Elle dit 20). Here, the mirror image of the spinning spider reflects the natural rhythm of women's work. Ballestra-Puech's study, Métamorphoses d'Arachné, suggests that the spider's web expresses "une poétique de l'immanence.(...) Le poète tend ses fils dans l'ici et maintenant du langage. Sa tâche est sans fin" (407). She also explains in "La Toile et le texte" how critics have distinguished between Minerva's weaving, evaluated positively as dignified and didactic, and Arachné's work, criticized as vertiginous, untraditional, and irrational (31).<sup>140</sup>

Khoury-Ghata's representation of the spider and spinning often reflects the irrational dimension of the female figure. "Un faux pas du soleil" portrays a widow who, while cleaning house, "mit une housse sur la toile d'araignée" (Anthologie personnelle 118). While the act of covering the web seems irrational, it also mimics the traditional gesture of laying a shroud, and implies that the tasks of spinning and writing have been put to rest along with the deceased. The irrational is more pronounced when the mother is portrayed as knitting a "woolen baby": "La mère tricote un bébé de laine long comme l'année" ("Autour d'un cerisier," Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 130).

Female figures knit, sew, and mend, particularly in Khoury-Ghata's later works, such as Elle dit and Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits.<sup>141</sup> Ballestra-Puech proposes that the metaphor of the weaving spider in the artwork of contemporary sculptress Louise

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<sup>140</sup> She notes that adherents of Deleuze and Barthes consider the spider and the web a sign of "folie" and the abolition of the subject; whereas, Puig and Cixous consider the spider and web a figure of creation markedly present in the feminine dimension.

<sup>141</sup> We recall here Schehadé's representations in poetry of women engaged in similar tasks.

Bourgeois was strongly influenced by the artist's mother, who worked as a seamstress. Indeed, Khoury-Ghata's autobiographical work, La Maison aux orties, nostalgically recalls how sewing was a family pastime. As a young girl, the author observed her mother at nightfall "confectionnant des choses avec des restes de tissus ou de fil" (11). Her mother's four female cousins earned their living "à la sueur de leur aiguille": "Quatre cousinettes se relayaient à leur Singer comme timoniers au gouvernail d'un navire" (18). In a more humorous vein, the cousins' love for the same man is represented by a sewing metaphor: "Elles se l'étaient refileé comme une bobine de fil" (20). Finally, the poet uses another metaphor to describe her autobiographical writing: "Je couds tel un patchwork des morceaux de ma vie (18). Thus, sewing, like the mythical task of weaving, is represented as patching together fragments of cloth, love, and life, in order to create a whole.

The poem "Orties" portrays the mother as an overworked seamstress: "et elle pédalait de nouveau sur sa machine à coudre / tabliers linceuls robe de mariée se suivaient dans le désordre / elle coupera le fil à la tombée de la nuit / à la tombée de ses paupières cousues d'un fil de feu" (Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 25) While the absence of punctuation mimics the flow of a continuous thread, the image of the mother's cutting the thread evokes the mythical figure of Atropos, whose identical gesture represents the rupture of a man's life. Khoury-Ghata's verse renders the fatal gesture absurdly comic when the mother's sewing machine needle cuts short the conversation of sparrows that turn pale in response:

Sa machine à coudre discute à peine haleine avec les moineaux alignés sur  
 la rambarde  
 ils pâlisent quand l'aiguille coupe le fil de la conversation  
 la femme penchée sur l'ourlet est leur doublure déplumée  
 leur manteau de dimanche / leur parapluie  
 ("Miroir transis," Compassion des pierres 86)

Thus, the female figure is depicted as an extraordinary craftswoman who, like Clothos, Lachésis, and Atropos, has the power to create, maintain, and terminate the thread of life.

The mother, in particular, is often portrayed as knitting. The metaphorical link between "chant" and "tissage," as well as the terrestrial and celestial, emerges in the following verses in "Elle dit," which portray the mother talking to angels: 'Elle raconte ses rêves aux anges qui traversent son lit par mégarde [...] persuadés qu'elle se trompe de prairie et de rêve / qu'elle tricote avec un fil sans issue' (Elle dit 32). The mother's failure to convince the angels seems to render her voice impotent and her task futile. In contrast, as we observed earlier, the mother is capable of producing extraordinary handwork, such as "a woolen baby."

Other extraordinary events associated with knitting and sewing happen in the unusual village depicted in 'Les Sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse'. One longtime Communist, whose son sleeps with a female goat, possesses a ball of yarn working autonomously as it 'fond et tricote des manteaux aux frileux' ("Elle dit," Elle dit 77). Another woman, whose likeness a painter has incorporated into a stained glass angel, renounces her capricious ways and 'se met à tricoter pour le marchand de couleurs' (78). Thanks to her unfaithful husband, whose legs have shrunk in the wash, one woman uses extra fabric to fashion 'trois gilets un pantalon et un noeud papillon pour le mendiant de

la paroisse' (85). The ordinary tasks of knitting and sewing are thus rendered extraordinary. While the first woman cannot control her son's strange love life, her yarn produces warm clothes for the needy. The second one abandons her errant ways to knit for an artist, who had produced a flattering portrait. The third woman takes from her feckless husband to provide clothes to a beggar. These actions, which compare women's virtues to men's follies, suggest that feminine handwork is a superior calling, whether it serves a religious or secular purpose. The benevolent function of providing clothing to the less fortunate in the community suggests that the simple feminine tasks of knitting and sewing maintain the social fabric of the village community.

The collective function of weaving is also represented by other celestial and terrestrial figures that exercise complicity in the domestic sphere. An angel "tricote une brassière de ses cheveux" ("Elle dit," Elle dit 18). Clocks "tricotèrent des nuits plus étroites" (62). A maternal dress "tricote des manteaux trop étroits pour des adultes / trop longs pour des nouveau-nés / se terminant toujours par une queue" ("Inhumations," Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 82). The rain knits "un habit chaud pour le jardin si pauvre" (85). Finally, weaving is evoked as a sacred feminine ritual by the woman who "noue laine et rayons / lui tisse un tapis de prière à quatre noeuds" (91).

### Linge

The theme of "linge" is also essential to Khoury-Ghata's portrait of the female figure: "Une vie, dit-elle, c'est comme un linge sur un corde / son sort dépend de la vitesse du vent" ("Miroirs transis," Compassion des pierres 60). Mythological references

link it to the feminine element of water. Discussing the significance of “tissu” in an aquatic context, Durand proposes the expression “fil de l’eau” as a symbol of continuity and illustrates how folds of fabric, especially in movement, exhibit aquatic qualities (371-72). Durand underscores the link between the mythic feminine figures of Maya and Mélusine, whose attributes celebrate respectively the veil and the fecundity of water. In addition, he asserts that the cult of “la Grande Mère” oscillates “où se confondent vertus aquatiques et qualités terrestres” (261).

Surrealist images tend to represent water as an expression of hope and the fluidity of desire more than as an agent of purification (266). Durand lists the aquatic metaphors used by Breton: “fontaines, nacelles, rivières, navires, pluie, larmes, miroir de l’eau, cascades”, all of which are subordinate to “l’archétype supreme,” which is the “symbole de la femme”. In a similar fashion, the poetry of Khoury-Ghata often employs aquatic metaphors; however, her representation of the “lingère” mitigates the erotic aspect by accentuating the domestic female figure at work. Furthermore, Khoury-Ghata’s images of “linge,” pure and impure, express a tension suggestive of what Kristeva describes in Powers of Horror as a crossing over of the dichotomous (Oliver 242).

Firstly, “linge” constitutes multiple meanings. Not only does it refer to linens and laundry, which evoke the intimate rituals of domestic life symbolized by bed sheets, curtains, and tablecloths, for instance, but it can also signify undergarments. It functions, therefore, as “un voile” that covers and, when removed, reveals bare furniture and windows as well as the human body. Khoury-Ghata uses the topos of “linge” in multiple ways to cover and, in particular, to reveal the intimacy of domestic life. This produces



two contrasting images of the female figure. One projects an ethereal image of women working with pure primordial elements, such as water and wind, and the other suggests the mundane airing of dirty laundry.

While Khoury-Ghata's female figures rarely have contact with the sea, and are occasionally linked to rivers and rain, the topos of wet laundry best represents the female figure's proximity to water and, in one case, her control of it: "le fleuve ne dépassait pas la corde à linge de la femme" ("Orties," Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 46). Laundry represents contact with cosmic forces: "Son linge trempe toute la nuit sous la lune qui lave à froid les cimes et les draps" ("Elle dit," Elle dit 114). The clothesline's extension suggests the cosmic contours of the domestic sphere: "les femmes suspendaient linge et nuages à la même corde" ("Elle dit" 104). Personifying the laundress, "l'horizon avait tendu sa corde entre deux pommes sans leur intervention" ("Inhumations," Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 107). Like other domestic chores, laundry serves as a metaphor for writing: "les pages tournées claquent comme linge sur une corde" (75).

Laundry also functions as a symbol of the collective. It constitutes a communal feminine task: "Fatiguées de tordre un linge sec / les femmes s'appuyaient sur l'air comme au bras d'un fiancé" ("Elle dit," Elle dit 26). The city landscape is compared to hanging laundry: "la ville avec ses maisons ressemble à du linge sur une corde (138). Finally, it serves as the veiled backdrop of a national tragedy. Victims of war are witnessed: "visible à travers le linge sur nos cordes leur pays leur tourne le dos" ("Orties," Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 20).

The significance of "linge" represented as clean laundry juxtaposes its

representation as intimate and stained apparel. These opposing images of laundry thus link the female figure to the corresponding dichotomy of purity and impurity. The erotic dimension of “linge” appears early in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry. “Au sud du silence” predicts the harsh future of a poet: “Tu auras pour cité les frontières du silence (...) pour épouse la soif qui sort de son linge délirante et nue” (Mon Anthologie 20).

Undergarments flapping in the wind mock the sacred: “le caleçon rouge suspendu à la corde peut s’envoler avec les ballons de la noce maintenant que l’église est fermée” (“Miroirs transis,” Compassion des pierres 37).

The impure expresses the abject when blood stains are symbolized as dark kisses: “Sur son toit séchait un linge taché de baisers noirs” (“Basse enfance,” Anthologie personnelle 38). Other dirty laundry is destined for burial: “ma mère enterra son linge sanglant sous le sycomore” (“Basse enfance,” Anthologie personnelle 36). “Le sol ne servait qu’aux femmes qui creusaient avec fureur / pour enterrer leur linge mort” (“Elle dit,” Elle dit 102). Thus, Khoury-Ghata’s portrait of the “lingère” reflects mythic traces of an aquatic feminine that symbolizes both purity and impurity. The topos of “linge” brings the female figure into contact with cosmic forces and underscores her attachment to the collective.

### Cuisine

Kristeva’s Stabat mater identifies milk and tears as “privileged signs of the Mater Dolorosa”. They function as “the metaphors of non-speech, of a ‘semiotic’ that linguistic communication does not account for” (Moi 173-174). In “Basse enfance,” verses

describe the mother: “ses larmes font déborder le ruisseau quand elle prépare le plat de fèves au mort affamé” (Anthologie personnelle 42). The female figure’s role as a “nourrice” is critical to the representation of Durand’s nocturnal order. Moreover, Faris demonstrates how the cooking skills of female protagonists in the magical realist narratives of Laura Esquivel’s Like Water for Chocolate and Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children produce mystical (magical) experiences and generate a feminine narrative (204-207). Culinary skills and tools provoke metamorphosis and other phenomena in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry. For example, in the poem “Les Sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse,” a widow shells “les cailloux” and simmers “un gravier de saison’ in her stew-pot.” The rabbi’s daughter, “transformée en marmite”, has spices and smoke mixed in her eyes (“Elle dit,” Elle dit 75-79). Other unusual events include a dead woman arriving to help “plumer la dernière caille” (67), a woman who shares an egg “avec trois anges noirs” (33), and a copper bowl in which “confitures bouillaient avec les étoiles” (62). Like other domestic tasks in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry, cooking promotes the female figure’s extraordinary skills as a food provider and healer.

Milk is a fundamental symbol in the mystical structure of Durand’s régime nocturnal: “L’aliment primordial, l’archétype alimentaire, c’est bien le lait” (294). Durand adds that “images lactiformes se retrouvent dans les cultes primitifs de la Grande Déesse” (296). Evocations of milk, such as those found in expressions like “garantie de femme laiteuse” and “odeur laiteuse de vagues”, are abundant in Khoury-Ghata’s verse and symbolize the omnipresent maternal. Milk’s link to the cosmos is underscored by multiple references to “la Voie lactée.” Its relationship with the moon is particularly

significant. The night is “soupçonnée de traire la lune pour vendre son lait aux riches galaxies” (“Basse enfance,” Anthologie personnelle 44) The mother, who “milks” the moon, “conservait son lait dans une jarre femelle” (“Orties,” Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 26). The air is sweetly scented with “le goût sucré du lait trempé dans la vanille” (“12 Juillet 2006”, Les Obscurcis). A young mother teaches her child “à traire les arbres femelles et boire leur lait/tête renversée en arrière (32). A child holds in a handkerchief “la dent de lait” (“Poèmes suspendus,” Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 54).

Other verses accentuate the potential abjectiveness of milk which can spoil due to malevolent forces: “Le vent qui prend à rebours les maisons avec leur linge tiède / fera tourner le lait de la mère (“Elle dit,” Elle dit 63) The mother warns against turning pages the wrong way because “les mots inversés ont le vertige / l’encre perturbée caille comme un mauvais lait (“Basse enfance”, Anthologie personnelle 29). Mother admonishes: “sa sueur acide fait tourner le lait dans les jarres” and “l’odeur des algues fait tourner son lait” (“Poèmes suspendus,” Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 92).

An earlier citation depicts the female figure sharing an egg with three black angels. Like milk, the egg both symbolizes the reproductive function of the female figure and represents an essential form of nourishment in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry. According to Durand, the egg belongs to “l’isomorphisme de l’intimité”: “L’oeuf philosophique de l’alchimie occidentale et extrême-orientale se trouve naturellement lié à ce contexte de l’intimité utérine” (289). “Les Sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse” underscores the egg’s significance as the source of origins: “Au début était l’oeuf répète Rahil soir et matin” (“Elle dit,” Elle dit 77). Khoury-Ghata’s representation of food reflects a

nocturnal strategy of promoting the most humble and elementary elements.

Faris suggests that the “female tone” in magical realism is curative, in the context of representing “a practical and communal relation to the world of spirits” (186-187). In Khoury-Ghata’s poetry, spices and herbs are touted as maternal remedies. As we observed in verses in “Orties,”: “Jaune du persil qui active le sang récalcitrant / épaisse de la menthe contre les nausées / sinieuse du safran qui fait pâlir le riz / et de la verveine capable d’apaiser la colère”. Other verses express traditional feminine practices: “l’herbe du diable séchant sur les toits avec le thym et le basilic / guérissait les migraines (25), “sous l’aisselle une branche d’eucalyptus contre la toux (“Inhumations,” Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 73). Even the affect of herbs on the dead is taken into consideration: “basilic exsangue les morts en pleine vigueur” (Les Obscurcis 14). Representations of honey, bread, and other foods contribute to the portrait of the domestic female figure, whose culinary wisdom is based on working with the most basic and rustic food substances, whose purpose is to nourish and heal cosmic and terrestrial figures, in addition to the living and the dead.

While this section focused on the domains of “tissage,” “linge,” and “cuisine,” Khoury-Ghata’s poetry represents an abundance of other chores, including sweeping, sponging, ironing, kneading, and polishing windows. All of these feminine activities reflect the work ethic of a woman, whether toiling alone or in solidarity with other women and cosmic forces, remains devoted to two inextricable tasks, rehabilitating death and rendering the universe more habitable. The virtues and extraordinary skills of the humble domestic figure resemble those of a myriad of mythical figures and archetypes

enumerated by Durand, Ballestra-Puech, and Brunel. However, evoking the dominion of a “Grande Déesse,” Khoury-Ghata’s domestic heroine reflects a poetics of immanence rather than transcendence, in that she remains attached to a material universe.

### Female Voice: Phenomenon of Speech

Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic accentuates the oral as an extension of the mother’s “throat, voice, and breasts: music, rhythm, prosody (...)” (Oliver 79). Having explored the representation of the female figure’s body and gestures, this examination will now address her voice, whose significance is based more on the content of her expression rather than the number of times that it is expressed in the text. We observed, particularly in the poem “Orties,” Khoury-Ghata’s use of the first person singular “je;” however, in many of her poems, the poet gives voice to a lone female figure, “elle”, sometimes explicitly identified as her mother, “ma mère”. However, verses often leave enough latitude for the “elle” to represent a universal female figure. Khoury Ghata attests to the inclusiveness of "elle": “Elle, c’est moi, c’est ma mère, c’est ma grand-mère et toutes les femmes de mon village” (Stout 313). In Khoury-Ghata’s poetry, the feminine voice, singular or plural, carries the potential to speak for women whose experiences are bound by domesticity and death. The representation of the female figure’s voice, principally expressed by “elle”, reveals her close attachment to cosmic and terrestrial figures and underscores her role in the rehabilitation of death. In this context, her utterances express the rhetoric of the nocturnal order’s mystical structures.

While the representation of the female figure’s voice is muted in Vénus Khoury-

Ghata's first collection Mon Anthologie, it emerges explicitly in the opening poem, "Basse enfance" (Anthologie personnelle), which recounts the poet's memories of childhood. The voice belongs to "ma mère": "Nos cris disait-elle / rayaient les vitres de la lune / et éraflaient les angles des tombes qui tirent leur lait de la lune" (16). Here the mother refers to children's raised voices demanding attention. The ambiguity of the possessive plural pronoun suggests the inclusion of the poet/narrator, when she was a child and, perhaps, even the mother herself as one of the noisemakers, whose collective vocal power is described as having marred both the celestial (the moon) and terrestrial (tombs). The imperfect use of "dire" alludes to the mother's habitual use of hyperbole, which has the effect of transforming the banal gesture of shouting into a supernatural event. In addition, the mother's expression domesticates the "merveilleux" by giving the moon the attributes of windows and motherhood (the source of milk). Tombs, domiciles of the dead, are also portrayed as consumers/imbibers of the moon's milk. The mother's voice thus integrates cosmic and terrestrial elements into the maternal and domestic spheres, while rehabilitating death.

As the title implies, the poem "Elle dit" treats the feminine voice as the subject of a 60-page sequence of verse that pays tribute to the maternal figure. Drawing inspiration from verses in "Basse enfance," "Elle dit" offers a more comprehensive portrait of the feminine figure, especially in her role as a widow. Her first utterance, which appears on the first line of the second page establishes her link to the dead: "Elle dit / creuse là où l'ombre peut se tenir debout / Et elle ferme sa porte aux arbres venus partager son deuil" (10). The female figure's command to dig, after having determined the precise location

for the grave, evokes the nocturnal theme of descent (226). Her closing the door to the trees, which personify guests, signifies a decisive gesture of self-imposed solitude, which evokes the nocturnal theme of “enfermement.” While the status of widowhood implies a marginalized existence among the living, it also grants her a privileged relationship with the dead.

Assuming the mythical role of “terre-mère,” the widow shares her terrestrial domain with the dead. She hears them, sees them, and speaks to them. Like a mother who issues instructions to her hapless children, the female figure is depicted as shouting at the deceased who seems to have lost his way: “Chevauche un tilleul pour rentrer chez toi” lui crie-t-elle en désignant l’arbre” (15). Prepared to share a meal, she addresses the dead using the familiar ‘tu’: “Hé toi! / appelle-t-elle aux heures des repas la silhouette invisible / inclinée sur le sillon / car il arrive aux morts de se pencher” (16). In a similar vein, she is portrayed as chastising the dead, regardless of age or status: “Ma mère accusait le poète mort depuis un siècle / de mélanger sa voix à ses cahiers” (43). “Bouche contre terre”, she launches insults at them.

The poem “Orties” in Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits resumes the representation of the maternal voice in the context of the dead. The mother emerges from the obscurity of death “pour crier qu’elle était ma mère”. Like a missing hostess, she is portrayed, almost comically, as fretting about her own burial service and the domestic chores involved:

quel temps faisait-il le jour de mon enterrement?



Avait-on prévu des chaises pour les visiteurs suivis des chiens?  
 avait-on moulu du café pour les insomniaques?  
 s'essuyaient-ils les pieds sur le paillason avant de traverser le seuil?  
 Le marc de café lui tenait lieu de seule lecture

Later in the poem, her utterance of a single word, “night,” triggers collective family activities in the domestic sphere:

elle disait nuit / et nous ramassions linges et nuages suspendus à la corde  
 ...  
 elle disait mer  
 et nous nous hissions jusqu'à la lucarne et  
 cette odeur laiteuse de vagues jamais vues de près  
 ...  
 elle disait cavité brèche et  
 nous creusions avec rage pour nous assurer qu'il y avait de la terre  
 dans la terre  
 et qu'il y avait plus humble que nous  
 elle disait lettre  
 et nous attendions sur le pas de la porte la mauvaise nouvelle  
 décès de parent ou de chèvre dans les maisons plombées par la neige (22)

These verses thus evoke “la chute et la pénétration nocturnales,” plunging from the dark space of the night to the milky whiteness of the sea, lunging into the depths of the earth, before emerging at the domicile's threshold, where the collective “we” awaited “bad news”, giving equal weight to the demise of family or goat. The evocation of the maternal in the “milky odor of waves” renders the nocturnal movement of descent less terrifying. In a similar fashion, death is rehabilitated by the evocation of a domestic animal and familiar structures.

In “Elle dit,” the maternal voice demonstrates her knowledge of the dead by talking about their habits and traditions: “Les morts dit-elle / sont clos sur eux-mêmes

comme le sang (...) Seules leurs voix traversent les obstacles” (25). She also expresses her wishes about her own burial in verses distinguished by the rare expression of the first person singular and the future tense:

Un jour dit-elle  
je bâtirai ma maison de pierres et de lampes  
avec ma tombe sur les branches  
portée au bout des bras d’un sycomore (71)

Her desire, then, is to construct a tomb, described as a “house of stone and lamps”, where elements of earth and fire meet in the welcoming embrace of a sycamore. The female figure’s vision of a final resting place evokes the tree’s function as a messianic symbol. This representation of the female figure’s quest for a final reconciliation of life and death forces exemplifies Khoury-Ghata’s poetics of commemorating the domestic feminine voice.

The maternal figure’s voice also proves to be voluble in “Orties.” Although the mother’s initial pretext for having returned from the dead is to remove nettles: “j’aurais dû le faire de mon vivant”, explique-t-elle sur un ton d’excuse”(11), she is compelled to speak as if to make up for lost time:

Elle parle pour parler  
son silence pouvant être mal interprété  
faire croire qu’elle est morte  
elle parle pour remplir la page  
...  
Elle dit des choses sans importance  
et les années lui tombent dessus à mesure qu’elle parle  
une ride par phrase

Exercising parental censorship, she asks her son to write “à la troisième personne pour qu’on ne te reconnaisse pas / au présent pour faire table rase du passé”. (24) Her maternal advice carries over to terrestrial and aerial creatures: “Elle fait cause commune avec un mûrier et un merle oeuvrant entre écorce et aubier / ‘ménage-toi lui répète-t-elle’”(18).

The mother’s voice in “Basse enfance” underscores her spiritual devotion and determination to domesticate the universe. The maternal figure is portrayed as habitually shouting: “Il faut nettoyer la planète / nettoyer Dieu criait ma mère en nouant son tablier” (Anthologie personnelle 16). This domestic imperative, underscored by the repetition of “nettoyer,” assigns equal value to the planet and God as places/spaces that require cleaning. Tying the apron strings symbolizes a familiar and decisive maternal gesture in Khoury-Ghata’s verse, which symbolizes the female figure’s desire for attachment. The mother’s exaggerated ambition to clean not only the planet, but also God, adds a comic touch to this portrait of an overzealous housewife, who extends her domestic sphere to the heavens.

The maternal figure is also represented as communicating with God: “Ta voix mère s’adressant à Dieu par la lucarne / faisait mordre le sol au grenadier” (21). The positive image of the mother’s supplication juxtaposes the negative image of the earth biting the tree, perhaps in jealousy or frustration. The mother here finds herself between two domains, one spiritual and ephemeral and the other terrestrial and sensual. Not only does the mother address God, she also talks to angels and natural elements: “Elle raconte

ses rêves aux anges qui traversent son lit par mégarde...’Alors que je traversais une prairie...’” (32) Her exchanges with the wind are reciprocal: “Le vent dans le figuier se tait lorsqu’elle parle /et parle lorsqu’elle se tait (11). Like a proud matriarch, she announces the first fruits of one tree to another: “Tôt ce matin / elle annonça au mélèze que son cerisier portait ses premiers fruits” (29).

In addition, the mother’s voice portrays her skills as a “conteuse” who tells the story of the world’s origins:

Le déluge disait-elle c’est avant la première page  
 quand les corbeaux étaient encore noirs  
 les hommes parlaient une langue incolore  
 ...  
 La terre explique-t-elle était illisible à l’époque  
 à cause des vents qui l’effaçaient aussitôt qu’elle s’écrivait  
 de droite à gauche d’après les géographes de l’Aleph (“Elle dit,” Elle dit  
 48)

Her version of events in Genesis, characterized by nocturnal images of the flood and black crows, contains multiple references to communication (speaking reading, and writing) and its effacement. The implied fusion of “one colorless language” and the right-to-left writing system, which evokes Arabic, represent nocturnal themes of fusion and inversion.<sup>142</sup>

“Elle dit” also reveals the female figure’s dark view of life and her mistrust of man. She declares: “La falaise dit-elle s’émiette comme un pain pauvre et ce ne sont pas les chênes taciturnes qui sauveront la réputation du paysage” (12). Alluding to the

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<sup>142</sup> “Les mots” in Compassion des pierres represents similar images of the beginning of the world.

fragility of cliffs and trees suggests that the appearance of force hides weakness. “Elle dit / les migrateurs ne remplaceront pas la route / et ne sont pas les miettes de pain qui vont dérouter les hirondelles”. She thus expresses a mistrust of those without a fixed domicile. She also compares life on earth to a common domestic mishap: “Elle dit / la terre est si grande on ne peut que s’y perdre comme l’eau / d’une jarre cassée” (64). These negative constructions (antiphrasis) and symbols (deterioration of rock, crumbling bread, and broken jar) represent a nocturnal view of the world.

Nocturnal rhetoric is also expressed by adages that expose the mother’s attachment to superstitions: “Cracher dans la pluie porte bonheur dit-elle” (66); “Labourer la nuit fait perdre un pain à chaque sillon dit-elle” (111); “Ne tournez pas les pages à l’envers / disait ma mère” (29). As we observed in “Orties,” the maternal figure is portrayed as the mistress of euphemisms and negative constructions: “elle dit oiseaux pour ne pas dire guerre / elle dit guerre pour ne pas dire folie du fils et du grenadier” (Quelle est la nuit parmi les nuits 23). These verses allude to the mother’s evasion of naming the tragic realities of war and madness that have marked her life and that of her community. As we noted similarly in the Introduction, the structure of those verses represents an inverted version of Georges Schehadé’s verses in his “Poésies II”: “Je dis fleur de montagne pour dire / Solitude / Je dis liberté pour dire désespoir”.

Durand suggests that the “Grandes Déesses” can be argumentative. In a similar vein, Khoury-Ghata’s verse represents the harsh female voice:

Jadis  
elle se disputait avec un vieux

se querellait avec des chiens  
 faisait du troc avec un rémouleur (11)

Her shouting in the following verses suggests aggression and frustration when she confronts what lies beyond her control in the domestic sphere. Looking out the window, she “interpelle la cité hostile / s’adresse à la caste hautaine des réverbères”. In “Inhumations” the female figure’s voice finally loses articulation, and merges with the fluid and supple sounds of nature. Having lost its sharpness, her voice becomes “une langue blanche repêchée des eaux (76) or “du frêne dans le vent” (118). Another verse compares the female voice to spun white thread, a symbol of absence and loss: “Blanche comme laine cardée la voix de celle qui remplace les objets perdus par les objets perdus” (“Inhumations” 114).

Khoury-Ghata’s poetry thus represents the nocturnal voice of the female figure. Traditionally marginal and forgotten, the female voice demands attention, issues commands, beseeches, instructs, advises, harangues, and interrogates. It persists in seeking contact with the Other, whether terrestrial or celestial, mortal or immortal.

#### Mythes au Féminin and the Rehabilitation of Death

Our examination of verses representing the body, gestures, and voice clearly demonstrates the feminine figure’s affiliation with myth, particularly in the framework of Durand’s mystical and synthetic structures, which express the human desire for fusion and attachment in the context of the domestic and maternal. The female body, gestures, and voice are often incarnated by a mother or widow: “mariage et veuvage leur octroient

une maison qu'elles cèdent / volontiers aux passants ne gardant pour leur usage que / la flaque d'eau nécessaire pour se mirer" ("Les Obscurcis," Les Obscurcis 14). In preceding chapters, we have observed the privileged status of the widow and mother, both of whom are preoccupied with the rehabilitation of death. Their portraits evoke the myths, Demeter and Persephone, and Orpheus and Eurydice. However, Khoury-Ghata's reversal of particular mythical figures' roles reflects the nocturnal order's rhetoric of inversion and proposes a regeneration of the two myths that corresponds with notions of feminist poetics. Moreover, the portrait of the widow is evocative of the myths of Ishtar and Tammuz or, perhaps, Isis and Osiris, if one takes into account the significance of the latter figure in Durand's list of nocturnal symbols.

### Mother

Durand underscores the appeal of the maternal archetype:

A toutes les époques donc, et dans toutes les cultures, les hommes ont imaginé une Grande Mère, une femme maternelle vers laquelle régressent les désirs de l'humanité. La Grande Mère est sûrement l'entité religieuse et psychologique la plus universelle...la somme de tous les dieux... qui tantôt nous renvoient à des attributs telluriques, tantôt aux épithètes aquatiques, mais toujours sont symboles d'un retour ou d'un regret (268).

Supplementing this explanation, Nicole Loraux responds to the question, "Qu'est-ce qu'une déesse?" in Histoires des femmes<sup>143</sup>, by citing Plato as having declared that "la

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<sup>143</sup> Nicole Loraux, "Qu'est-ce qu'une déesse?" Histoires des femmes, ed., George Duby (Paris: Plon, 1991): 33-64.

femme imite la terre.” Gè, as “terre-mère,” also represents a political role, because she is not only “mère” and “nourrice,” but also “patris, terre des pères” (47). According to Loraux, the Greek veneration of the mother is based on: her link to origins, an absence of frontiers, her metonymic function as “matrice”, and her force as a “corps sans mesure” (49). The Greeks considered her the mother of gods and men. With regard to the archetype “Grande Mère,” Loraux indicates that the adjective symbolizes “l’anonymat impersonnel” of the archetype, according to Bachofen’s determination that “le féminin singulier se fait générique, et que le pluriel vire au collectif” (50). Loraux effectively defines “la Grande Déesse maternelle” as a “fantasme réconciliateur puisqu’il unit sous son emprise les militantes du matriarcat et les adorateurs d’une grande consolatrice originaire (...) On satisfait en soi, à son insu peut-être, la nostalgie des commencements indifférenciés” (54).

The most critical figure in Khoury-Ghata’s writing is that of the mother. Mon Anthologie contains the seeds of the maternal figure that will reappear as an omnipresent figure in subsequent collections of poetry. In one of her first poems, “Au sud du silence” (Mon Anthologie 36), written in response to the Lebanese civil war, the maternal figure is linked to death and loss: “La mère est morte hier / son enfant s’est transformé en feuille / la pluie aux jambes grêles lui fait franchir les puits”. In contrast, the celebratory context of “Qui Parle au Nom du Jasmin,” which appears in the same collection, portrays a mother who “chantait berceuses à l’envers / et tricotait ses murs à l’endroit” (97). The portrayal of two traditional maternal activities, singing nursery songs and knitting, evokes the archetypal link between the thread and the voice, both of which serve in this context



to depict the marvelous construction of a maternal refuge.

In the same collection, verses expressing a primary alliteration explicitly identify the poet's mother: "Ma mère". An examination of several verses is enough to reveal some of the most important themes that resonate throughout Khoury-Ghata's poetic oeuvre, especially that of the mother as a superior figure in the cosmos. "Ma mère avait jumelé son basilic avec le chêne de la forêt / le conviant pâques après pâques à partager l'herbe et le cri de l'agneau". This first verse establishes the link between the maternal figure and nature, both flora and fauna. Moreover, it portrays her as an agent of fertility and fusion that, in this context, involves a mating ritual between basil, "her" humble aromatic plant, and oak, a noble tree of the forest. Khoury-Ghata's poetry often uses plants as feminine symbols and trees as masculine symbols. In addition, the recurrence of the word "pâques" underscores the maternal figure's role in overseeing spring rites and Christian rituals. Thus, the mother is linked to a sexualized encounter as well as the mingling of sacred and pagan traditions. In the same manner that "linge" confuses the pure and impure, the mother figure confounds the sacred and the profane.

The first verse of the second stanza reveals more: "Ma mère entassait dans ses rêves des maisons sans murs des mots sans syllabes / des étoiles défuntes qui ne brillaient que pour son sommeil". In this surrealist context, the maternal and domestic converge in a dream, where spatial and linguistic barriers are eliminated. Dreaming also gives the mother privileged access to the cosmos. Finally, the first verse of the third stanza recalls the mother's link to death: "Ma mère ouvrait ses armoires aux feuilles mortes qui s'aventuraient loin de leurs branches / les pliant dans le sens de ses draps, ourlets et

nervures vêtues des mêmes ténèbres”. Unlike the first verse that depicts the vitality of “la vie printanière,” this verse suggests the autumnal solemnity of “la nature morte.” The mother’s gesture of welcoming dead leaves into an intimate domestic space and folding them into her linens represents her tangible and sympathetic relationship with nature and death, which are metaphorically depicted as belonging to the same fabric. As we have observed in other verses, the mother’s affiliation with intimate spaces, and her manipulation of fabric (or thread) represent two recurring images of the archetypal female figure in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry.

The opening poem of her subsequent collection, Anthologie Personnelle, “Basse Enfance,” which serves as an “éloge” to the poet’s childhood, incorporates the same verses in which the maternal figure reigns supreme.

Ma mère s’abîmait dans le mouvement poussif de son balai  
luttant contre un sable qu’elle appelait désert  
contre une humidité qu’elle appelait eau friable  
étang  
...  
ses mains de balayeuse à l’écart du monde exhumaient des morts  
invisibles.(...) (12)

Thus, the maternal figure becomes a domestic warrior, armed with a broom, which represents one of the most prosaic instruments of feminine domestic power, usually affiliated with witches. The broom conforms to the symbol of the “bâton” in the synthetic structures of Durand’s nocturnal order. The mother’s supernatural prowess is further accentuated by the suggestion that her “sweeping hands” are capable of exhuming

the dead. Having promoted her mother's superior domestic skills, the poet then emphasizes her humility: "Mère si modeste / tu ne tirais aucune gloire du vent qui soufflait pour tes seuls bras qui balayait" (12).

The poet subsequently interjects herself into the poem as if to invoke her mother: "J'écris Mère / et une vieille femme se lève dans l'incertitude du soir" (17). In this manner, she employs a nocturnal inversion of the natural order, in as much as it is she, the daughter/poet, who creates "Mother," rather than the mother who creates the child. An equally significant inversion is evoked by the poet who, in the role of Creator, represents herself as raising the dead in the obscurity of night, in comparison with God, who oversees the dawn of life in the narrative of Genesis. We observed the poet's similar conjuring of the deceased mother in "Orties."

Khoury-Ghata's interpretation of the mother-daughter relationship thus effectively functions as an inversion of the Greek myth, Demeter and Persephone, which, according to certain French and American scholars, is one of the most popular myths in women's writing. Nicole Loraux explains that Demeter and Persephone maintain a privileged status as goddesses because they are "institutionnellement Métér et Kôré," who serve as "des symboles de la Mère et de la Fille" (38). They represent "ces pôles archétypaux de l'Eternel féminin," comprised of the "mère féconde" and the "jeune fille/vierge" (52). Vénus Khoury-Ghata's poetry reverses the roles of the mythical mother and daughter. "Terre-mère" Demeter mourning her daughter is replaced by the daughter-poet mourning her mother in "Basse enfance," "Elle dit," and "Orties." The merger of these maternal and mourning voices produces a powerful lament.

Explaining how American and European women writers adopt myth as a strategy to celebrate the maternal point of view, feminist poet and theorist Alicia Ostriker describes in her essay, “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,” how the Demeter-Kore story has been used as a tool to reconstitute lost families: “Mothers, daughters, and sisters must be recovered as parts of the ‘original women we are’” (74).<sup>144</sup> Susan Gubar argues that despite the criticism of this myth as a stereotypical representation and reinforcement of images of female passivity and masochism, it has inspired numerous nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, such as Mary Shelley, whose Proserpine uses myth to accentuate the feminine qualities of “emotional responsiveness, physical spontaneity, and instinctual selflessness,” which juxtapose masculine qualities of “rationality, competition and control”.<sup>145</sup>

Evidently, Khoury-Ghata’s representation of female figures in the context of myth finds common ground with these decades old American feminist readings, in as much as her poetry invokes her reunion with her mother and the women of a Lebanese village community. Furthermore, although family and acquaintances are implicated in her poetry, Khoury-Ghata’s portrayal of the female figure appears to aim for the representation of a more universal condition. This approach clearly aligns her with a long tradition of representing the female figure in the context of myth. Nevertheless,

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<sup>144</sup> Alicia Ostriker, “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking,” Signs 8.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982): 68-90. Françoise Lionnet’s Autobiographical Voices discusses Hurston’s interpretation of Persephone in Dust Tracks, 128.

<sup>145</sup> Susan Gubar, “Mother, maiden, and the marriage of death,” Women’s Studies, Vol. 6, (Gordon and Breach Science Publishers Inc., 1979): 301-305.

Khoury-Ghata has left her own imprint on the myth by using fragments of her own history to invert the mother-daughter roles.

### Widow

Pierre Brunel lauds Vénus Khoury-Ghata as an Orphée “au féminin,” no doubt because of her status as a poet and novelist who submerges herself in an imaginary underworld with the quest of reviving the dead and forgotten in her narratives. Evidently, her assumption of the traditionally masculine role of Orphée represents an inversion of the myth. Verses that we have examined in this chapter and preceding ones underscore the poet’s efforts to portray the voice and gestures of her lost mother, as well as those of other family members, the Lebanese community, and beyond.

Durand and other theorists here do not specifically identify the widow as an archetype; however, the representation of the widow in French Renaissance poetry suggests one precursor of Khoury-Ghata’s portrait of the grieving female figure. Melanie Gregg’s study, “Women’s Poetry of Grief and Mourning,” notes that poets like Christine de Pisan “turn to the forces of their bodies to express the ineffable” (55).<sup>146</sup> Referring to Kristeva’s assertion that women represent “what remains above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies,” Gregg argues that Renaissance women poets’ representation of their grieving bodies constitutes a “double transgression,” because they used the female body as a means of expression and refused to maintain the silence expected of grieving women of that period (61).

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<sup>146</sup> This article appears in a volume of collected essays in Response to Death. Ed. Christian Riegel, (University of Alberta, 2005): 55-74.

Khoury-Ghata's portrait of a widow, which is a recurring figure in her nocturnal landscape, represents a similar drama of the mourning body.<sup>147</sup> Inspired by her personal experience, as well as that of her mother, this figure functions as a mediator with the dead and expresses personal as well as collective mourning. She exemplifies the values of the “terre-mère.”

Verses in “Un faux pas du soleil” (Mon Anthologie) recount the poet’s grief following the death of her husband, Jean. Her tender gesture: “la veuve serre son coeur dans un baluchon” evokes the nocturnal symbols of intimacy and closure. In Anthologie personnelle, “son coeur” is replaced by “ses larmes.” In “Monologue du mort,” the widow considers the possibility of reclaiming her husband: “Elle se demanda s’il fallait le retenir / le vêtir de son corps suspendu derrière une porte / La main en porte-voix / elle l’appela jusqu’au couchant” (134). Her body expresses despair: “La veuve roule son corps sur la pente... Désespoir aussi haut qu’une tempête”. She subsequently vocalizes her sorrow: “La veuve émiette son cri / essore ses larmes / puis s’ensevelit dans un sillon de son drap (...)”.

The most comprehensive and compelling portrait of the widow is found in Anthologie personnelle, where the mystical structures of the nocturnal regime are especially pronounced by the representation of startling images, the digestive reflex (odor, taste, and touch), and miniaturization. Mystical symbols and archetypes are

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<sup>147</sup> Khoury-Ghata also represents the widow in the novel La Maison aux orties that recounts her discussions with her deceased husband, and in the novel Privilège des morts which traces the return of a widow to her ex-husband's island property where his phantom haunts her.

paramount: “la femme,” “la demeure,” “la tombe,” “le ventre,” “le récipient,” “la substance,” and “Osiris.” This sequence of approximately 50 verses enumerates a widow’s activities over the course of ten days following her husband’s death. The organization of the sequence: “Le premier jour”...”Le deuxième jour”...”Le troisième jour”, and so forth, evoke the narrative structure of Genesis. The widow is depicted as progressively taking more extreme measures to exorcize her grief, the accumulation of which, it is suggested, produces the resurrection of her husband.

Le premier jour après sa mort  
 elle plia ses miroirs  
 mit une house sur la toile d’araignée  
 puis ligota le lit qui battait des ailes prêt à s’évader

Le deuxième jour après sa mort  
 elle remplit ses poches de copeaux de bois  
 jeta du sel par-dessus l’épaule de sa maison  
 et s’en alla un arbre sous chaque bras

These two stanzas represent the intense physical labor exerted by the female figure as she undertakes multiple household chores, one after another. Her indoor activities, such as folding mirrors, covering the spider’s web, and making the bed, represent acts of containment, suggesting her suppression of grief. The first verses hint at the widow’s contact with unusual objects such as a spider’s web and a “winged” bed. Subsequent verses depicting the widow’s activities outside the domicile represent more outrageous behavior, in as much as she is described as having filled her pockets with wood chips, tossed salt over the house, and taken off with a tree under each arm. Clearly,

the widow's grief, which can no longer be contained by civilized domesticity, finds an outlet in nature.

The portrait of grief is amplified on the third day when the widow gives voice to her pain: "elle injuria les pigeons alignés sur ses larmes" and "appela jusqu'au couchant l'homme parti en transhumance". On the fourth day, the widow responds with violence: "un troupeau de buffles fit irruption dans sa chambre / réclamant le chasseur qui parlait leur dialecte / elle épaula son cri / tira une salve / troua le plafond de son sommeil".

The fifth day reveals physical evidence of death when she tracks footprints to "cette fosse où les choses ont une odeur de lièvre désossé." Symbolizing her own burial, she paints her face with earth then, on the sixth and seventh days, she attacks "l'ombre paisible des passants / égorgea les arbres". Contrary to the representation in numerous verses of the female figure's cultivation of peaceful and sympathetic relations with trees, these verses reveal her violent mistreatment and rejection of them. Confronting man-like trees in her garden she "mordit l'aisselle de leurs branches / puis vomit longuement des copeaux de bois."

The widow undergoes a ritual cleansing on the eighth day: "la mer hennit à sa porte / elle lava les berges de son ventre / puis cria jusqu'à l'embouchure où des hommes s'entrechoquaient comme des galets". Calm is subsequently restored on the ninth day when the widow becomes reflective. Having dried her tears on the roof of her house, she "se mira dans les pierres / nota dans ses yeux des lézardes pareilles à celle des saints vitraux".

It is only after this period of tranquility that the husband is portrayed as having



been resurrected, like Osiris, in diminutive form on the tenth day. The final verses are devoted to his ambivalent response to his widow:

il sortit de sa paume  
s'assit sur son ongle  
réclama à boire ses mots coutumiers et l'odeur d'amande de ses genoux

Il les ingurgita sans plaisir  
son voyage lui avait fait perdre le goût de l'eau écartelée." (118-119)

Thus, the cycle of mourning is completed in ten days. The physical and vocal exorcism of grief allows the widow to come to peace with her loss, and reconcile with the deceased, now shrunk to the size of her thumb. The widow's success in conjuring her husband, albeit in diminutive form, suggests a feminine interpretation of the Orpheus myth, in which the representation of the grieving female body overshadows that of the object of mourning. Durand's "classification isotopique des images" explicitly identifies Osiris as a nocturnal symbol. According to Egyptian myth, Isis recovers pieces of the murdered Osiris' body; however, Khoury-Ghata's portrait of the violent widow is perhaps more evocative of the Babylonian/Assyrian myth of Astarté (Ishtar), renowned as both a loving and volatile goddess, and whose recovery of Tammuz obliges her to descend to the underworld where she passes through seven gates before reaching Death.

While portraits of the mother and widow are indispensable to Khoury-Ghata's representation in verse of the female figure, explicit references to the young unmarried woman or young girl are much less common. Perhaps this is partially due to the poet's reluctance to associate the young with the omnipresent theme of death. In addition, while

many of Khoury-Ghata's novels, including Sept pierres pour la femme adultère, La Maîtresse du notable, and Le Moine, l'ottoman et la femme du grand argentier feature an adulteress as the principal protagonist, her poetry does not offer a comparable representation. However, as we shall see in the following chapter, the poet's picaresque representation of a village in "Les Sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse" offers a brief and modest portrait of a prostitute. One might conclude that Khoury-Ghata favors poetry, rather than the novel, as an expression best suited for accentuating the traditional virtues of the female figure and according her a mythical stature.

#### Male Figure: Ange Déchu

The female figure has been the major focus of my dissertation; however, my examination will include a brief assessment of the poet's portrait of the singular male figure, who occupies a subordinate but significant role in Khoury-Ghata's verse in as much as he is often portrayed as interacting with or in juxtaposition with the female figure. Unlike the singular female figure, whose portrait is supported by an extensive lexicon describing her body, voice, and gestures, the male figure remains more elusive and his physical attributes more oblique. He is principally evoked by his gestures and, in comparison with the voice of the female figure, that of the male figure remains relatively mute. The titles of poems are emblematic of this latter difference. There is Elle dit, but there is no Il dit, only Ils, which represents the collective dead.

Nevertheless, Khoury-Ghata's portrait of the male figure contributes to a more comprehensive interpretation of myth, especially in the context of the nocturnal order,

whose structures accord a superior position to the female figure. Unlike the diurnal order, in which the male figure is identified as the “Grand Souverain” and assumes the role of a virile hero, the nocturnal order assigns the male figure a negative and diminished role. We observed a compelling example of that in verses from Anthologie personnelle that recount the widow’s supernatural revival of her recently deceased husband, who finally emerges to sit on her fingernail. Durand suggests that the nocturnal male figure serves as “un ange déchu (...) par vocation d’incarnation si l’on peut dire, qui assume le mythe agraire du héros lapidé et déchiré, et se double du personnage christique (...).” (351). Our examination in Chapter 5 of “Autour d’un cerisier” proposed the cherry tree as an unhappy hero who represents the initiation, sacrifice, and resurrection of the nocturnal archetype “le Fils.”

In a similar vein, while the diurnal order recognizes the sovereignty of the father figure, the nocturnal order identifies the paternal figure as a menace. This negative representation of the father figure evokes Kristeva's discussion in Black Sun of "the paternal signifier that is disowned, weakened, ambiguous, devalorized, but nevertheless persistent (...) (47). We observed the manifestation of this logic in the portrait of the violent father and his mentally unstable son in “Orties.” Moreover, Durand affirms that initiation in the nocturnal order often involves “une épreuve mutilante.” Khoury-Ghata’s poetry and novels consistently suggest that her brother was psychologically “castrated” by his father who terrorized him and had him institutionalized. In fact, nearly all of the male figures in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry are portrayed as flawed.

Like the female figure, the male figure is often linked to archetypes and myths.

Verses in the cosmogonic context of “Les mots” portray man in the most universal sense as a primordial archetype tasked with creating language and a counting system. They depict a “pêcheur qui ferra le premier mot” and a “chasseur UN qui visa au lance-pierres le premier chiffre”. In the context of the dawn of civilization, a man’s life is measured “par le nombre de femmes enrobées de son odeur / sa poussière le dit // L’homme prudent accrochait sa famille à sa ceinture / la mode le voulait” (Compassion des pierres 16). The evocation of the Biblical patriarch Noah adds to the poem’s mythical allure. In addition, man is linked to his symbolic peer, the tree:

Homme et chêne partageaient la même écorce  
 le même âge inscrit dans l’aubier  
 et même ombre  
 l’arbre en haut  
 l’homme en bas  
 et parfois l’inverse quand il prenait à la terre l’envie de se retourner (24)

Characteristic of the inverted logic of the nocturnal order, the preceding verses allude both to man’s subordinate place compared to the oak, and to the precariousness of man’s place in the world. The last verse leaves room for ambiguity with regard to which figure, the tree or the man, functions as the subject. Nonetheless, the man’s assuming the role conforms to the nocturnal yearning for resurrection (le retour). Furthermore, our examination of the representation of letters in “Les mots” revealed the flaws of “F” who “titubait” from smoking too much “devil’s weed” and a “club-footed” “Kaf.”

Verses in Fables pour un peuple d’argile, which received the “grand prix de la Société des Gens de Lettres” in 1993, offer a vivid portrayal of the male figure in a

mythical context. The title alludes more to the inventive nature of fables than to the poet's adherence to a specific literary form. This collection of over 200 verses is unique in Khoury-Ghata's poetry in that it explicitly represents a culture outside of the Mediterranean basin that consistently serves as the prime source of the poet's imagination. The poet explains that while visiting Mexico she examined clay statuettes that inspired her.<sup>148</sup> The poem's male protagonist represents the tragic destiny of the Olmec, a pre-Columbian people who inhabited the Gulf of Mexico region in 500-100 BC. The mysterious disappearance of these Mayan ancestors continues to be a subject of contemporary academic debate. Khoury-Ghata's integration of exotic names, places, objects, and rituals contributes to the poem's dramatic portrayal of a lost culture. The collection begins with a quatrain in which the poet uses "tu" as if addressing a confidant familiar with death:

Tu dis lorsqu'il t'arrive de mourir  
l'obscurité n'effraie que la nuit  
et les morts peureux n'ont qu'à rester chez eux  
en retenant leur noire respiration (7)

Having created a familiar and nocturnal ambiance, supported by the negative structure of "ne...que," the poet re-establishes an authoritative distance by adapting the third person singular to describe a male figure, contextualized by a traditional society's exchange of goods for services with a female figure: "Il lui fait don de six mesures de jojoba / elle lui ouvre sa peau herbeuse et son odeur de femme des hauts plateaux".

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<sup>148</sup> Charles Haroche, "Les Dieux et les mots." L'Humanité, 22 August 1992.

Evoking the synthetic structures' copulative reflex and the verbal theme of "relier," he ties the female figure to his body: "Il ficelle la femme et le feu autour de ses reins / et s'en va dans le paysage" (8).

The poet resumes her familiar address of "tu" to highlight the male figure's physical attributes and his gestures that resemble mythical feats: "Tu es un marcheur de crêtes et de cimes / un siffleur de vents et de serpents (...) tu marches les pieds en équerre / pour redessiner le cercle parfait de l'univers" (9). Subsequent verses identify the male figure by name and trace his origins to the mountains. The integration of mystical symbols, "le ventre" and "le voile," into the synthetic themes of the cycle and the triad, intensifies the visionary dimension of the nocturnal and reinforces the enigmatic narrative.

L'Olmèque venu du ventre de la montagne  
a tourné trois fois autour de son axe  
avant de croiser son ombre  
et de préférer son chiffre noir (10)

Contrary to a diurnal hero, whose absolute quest is a solar one, the Olmec seeks a more ambivalent sun, "un soleil éteint (...) pour éclairer de noir l'univers." This oxymoron, which evokes Kristeva's black sun of melancholy, conforms to the values of the nocturnal system that eschews the sun for the moon. This negative dynamic persists as the poet resumes her familiar address however, this time she underscores the Olmec's weaknesses. One of his flaws, a tendency to confuse things, evokes the mystical theme "confondre."

Tu te trompes continuellement de rêve et de planète  
 Tu confonds l'endroit et l'envers du paysage  
 et comptes tes arbres dans les deux sens (11)

Besides being described as “counting trees in both directions,” the male protagonist is also told: *Tu t'empêtres dans ton ombre et renverses ta maison,*” which brings to mind the representation of violent acts perpetuated by the paternal figure in “Orties.” The use of the present tense and anaphors to enumerate the male figure’s “nocturnal” activities suggests a persistent pattern of transgression. The notion of his guilt is reinforced when the poet recounts his action against an aquatic god: “*Tu enfermes le dieu des eaux douces dans ton puits / et ris en le voyant patauger dans une goutte de sa sueur*” (14). The nocturnal themes of “enfermement” and “gulliverisation” contribute to the fable’s narrative of a regressive dynamic, where figures are enclosed and shrunk, rather than opened and expanded.

Having insulted an immortal, the male protagonist meets his fate and is struck down: “*La fin des combats te tasse aussi bas que ta luzarne...Il a perdu la bataille de “Bonampak”* (18-19). All that remains of this fallen hero, “*fondu dans son champ,*” is “*le vacarme de sa plume frontal et le parler brutal du vent dans son goyavier*” (29). In Khoury-Ghata’s verse, the nocturnal figure of the Olmec exemplifies a lost civilization much in the same manner that “elle” incarnates a lost language and culture.

The male figure in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry is sometimes defined by his absence, in as much as he is represented as a phantom or as a deceased character. Interestingly, some of Khoury-Ghata’s novels manifest this strategy in their representation of husbands.

For instance, in Privilège des morts, a woman returns to the Mediterranean island of Kalfi to settle the affairs of her allegedly deceased ex-husband, Johan. As she moves around his property and its environs, she occasionally glimpses his silhouette and senses his footsteps. The plot of Le Moine, l'Ottoman et la femme du grand argentier revolves around the quest of a young Christian adulteress, Marie, on a quest to reunite with her lover, an Ottoman official named Jaafar. He does not make an appearance in the narrative until the end of the novel when he is depicted as a man frightened by the ghost of his ex-wife, then he dies under mysterious circumstances. In Sept pierres pour la femme adultère, the evocation of the heroine Noor's good-for-nothing husband, Moha, is limited to his being the subject of her conversations.

Khoury-Ghata's most searing portrait of the singular male figure as "absent" is found in Un faux pas du soleil which documents the untimely death of her husband, Jean Ghata. In the collection, Mon Anthologie, which includes excerpts of the poem, Khoury-Ghata responds to the question posed at the beginning of the avant-propos: *Pourquoi cet incessant besoin de parler de la mort?* :

Elle dévasta ma maison, fit saigner les coeurs et laissa derrière elle une odeur froide qui colle à jamais à ma peau, mes vêtements, mes murs. Les poèmes d'Un Faux pas du soleil furent écrits dans une grande panique, un grand vertige de terreur, dans une chambre d'hôpital, quatre étages au-dessus de celui qui s'enfonçait dans un brouillard épais, dans une salle de réanimation blafarde. Jean était au bord de la mort comme une maison peut être au bord d'une route (7).

In this portrayal of the male figure's passage into death, the second verse of the poem gives voice to the male figure, "il," represented as if he had found himself under



death's glacial blanket.

Givre  
 avait-il dit  
 et il amarra sa voix au ponton d'ouate (7)<sup>149</sup>

Initially in revolt against his mortality, the male figure adopts a negative stance. Immobilized by death's arrival, his only recourse lies in verbal denouncement and intellectual recalcitrance: "Il dénonça les arbres...Il ne négocia pas son départ". The anaphor of the personal pronoun "il" reinforces the notion of the male figure's resistance; however, in spite of his efforts, his body seems to betray him: "Son corps répété / il le porte à la manière d'un cierge / la mèche du regard tournée vers l'intérieur" (10). The evocation of a flickering candle suggests a diminished sign of life as well as his sanctification. In the following verses, his physical attributes are reduced to the essential, eyes, heart, and feet.

Les sources aux longs parcours  
 empruntent ses yeux  
 et éteignent son coeur qui flambe dans son sel

Dépouillé de ses pas  
 pour avoir voulu franchir les limites du monde

The most humble part of the body, the feet, are again evoked when the poet

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<sup>149</sup> These verses represent the volume published in 1982. Verses are represented slightly differently in Mon Anthologie and Anthologie personnelle. Khoury-Ghata often modifies verse that appears in more than one collection.

alludes to the duplicity of death and the waiting tomb: “Il attend un faux pas du soleil / pour l’entraîner dans son trou” (11). Once there, the male figure feels shame: “Nu sous ses haillons de pluie / d’où sa honte et son retrait dans la planète” and he yearns for escape “mais l’espace l’interrompt” (18). Rallying in an ironic protest, he exclaims: “J’ai déjà été mort” and calls for the gravedigger: “appelez le bourreau-fossoyeur / où sont les clefs la pèle / qu’on me redonne mes gestes laissés au débarcadère”. Adding a little macabre humor to the scene and reflecting vain hopes, verses imply the possibility of the man’s revival: “Il peut partir s’il le désire / en glissant sur le rire de son squelette” (26). In the same manner that Khoury-Ghata integrates into her text references to vomiting, pissing, and shitting, the evocation of the male cadaver serves as an example of Kristeva’s notion of the abject, representing a threatening aspect of self, an Other, that goes beyond one’s comfortable boundaries. In Un faux pas du soleil, Khoury-Ghata maintains the same objective that she portrays her deceased husband as having sought: “franchir les limites du monde”. Hence, lies the poetic power of these verses.

The male figure is often represented in the context of a gender-based dichotomy that is one of numerous binary constructions that compose Khoury-Ghata’s poetic universe. We noted, for example, the marked dichotomy of gender in our study of the poem “Variations autour d’un cerisier,” in which several male figures, including the father, are affiliated with linear forms and writing whereas female figures, including the mother, are affiliated with cycles and oral expression. The representation of a gender-based dichotomy also features sexual relations in which the male figure prevails. In Fables pour un peuple d’argile, the Olmec straps a woman to his reins. “Les Sept brins

de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse” alludes to the sexual fantasies of male figures and notes that one male figure sleeps with his female goat. In contrast, in the collection Nettles, “Les Marins sans navire” portrays a sailor to whom women concede without hesitation: “il sarcla / creusa des travées d’écume avec l’approbation des sillons”. Mixing the pleasures of sea and sex, the sailor's declaration alludes to mythical sirens “les vrais marins naviguent avec les poissons du plaisir sur des récifs femelles” (188).

In a more platonic context, we observed how “Orties” revealed a sympathetic portrait of the male figure in the character of Lucas, the “instituteur” in the village who “aima la morte”. Khoury-Ghata’s attachment to language instructors is also demonstrated in “Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse,” in which “Farhoud” lyrically expresses letters of the Arabic alphabet. The accentuation of these male figures’ positive qualities is clearly linked to their knowledge of the maternal language. Moreover, teaching represents a modest vocation. The postman in “Varations autour d’un cerisier” serves as another example of the common workingman. As we shall see in a detailed examination of “Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse” in Chapter 7, many of Khoury-Ghata’s male figures are identified by their vocations. Khoury-Ghata’s representation of the artisan or bureaucrat at the lower end of the economic ladder, like her portrait of the domestic housewife, evokes the nocturnal inversion of values, in which the little workingman replaces the noble and wealthy man as the principal protagonist. Nevertheless, the same verses will expose the male figure’s ample flaws.

Khoury-Ghata's representation of female and male figures in her poetry

demonstrates her masterly use of the durability of archetypes and the flexibility of mythical structures to transform family members, acquaintances, and the most ordinary individual, into fantastic heroines and fallen heroes. The depiction of their bodies, gestures, and voices in a nocturnal narrative juxtaposes domestic maternal strengths and masculine frailties that are most clearly revealed in portraits of the poet's deceased mother and husband. At the same time, the construction of these figures manifests the poet's mediation of personal and collective histories. Some of the same dichotomies and tensions that applied to the representation of the singular figure will be discussed in the following chapter in which we will examine figures in a collective sense.

## Chapter 7

### Figures as a Collective, Distorted and Resurrected

#### Introduction

Interrogating the difference between “mémoire et mythe,” Danièle Chauvin distinguishes myth “en quelque sorte d’une mémoire au-delà de toute mémoire historique et temporelle et qui assure la cohérence, la cohésion et la pérennité d’un groupe dans le temps”. A memoir, on the other hand, implies “un rapport, personnel ou collectif, au passé, à l’Histoire”. As for what they have in common: “Tous deux portent donc témoignage de l’identité et de la permanence dans le flux temporel, de la lutte de l’homme contre l’écoulement du temps, contre le changement, et contre ce changement suprême qu’est la mort.”<sup>150</sup> This study supports the notion that myth and memoir, like History and Myth, are intertwined in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry, which gives witness to the violent history of Lebanon, in particular, and the tragic human condition, in general.

Having examined the portrayal of the figure, principally as a function of gender, we will now turn to Khoury-Ghata’s representation of figures as a collective entity. Reviewing the notion of the mythico-poetic attitude as the expression of a “rallying point” and a “permanent meeting place for individuals and for groups of people,”<sup>151</sup> this chapter examines Khoury-Ghata’s vision of the collective, whose fragile unity serves as a mirror and critique of Lebanese society. Prior to the civil war that erupted in 1975, Lebanon was touted as the “Switzerland of the Middle East,” alluding to the peaceful

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<sup>150</sup>“Mémoire et mythe,” Questions de la mythocritique, 230.

<sup>151</sup> Brunel, Companion to Literary Myths, Heroes, and Archetypes, 862.

coexistence of its heterogeneous population, as well as its prosperity and natural beauty. Decades of violence and destruction have since debunked the myth of Lebanon as an emblematic haven in a volatile region.

It is in this context that Khoury-Ghata's verse integrates diverse mythical fragments, as well as Lebanese Arab and European literary traditions, particularly those affiliated with Christian narratives, in order to express the tensions of fundamental dichotomies that define local and universal collectives. An examination of specific verses will reveal two distinctive portrayals of the collective. One employs satire to represent a distorted or disfigured community. Another adopts an elegiac stance to resurrect or reconfigure the collective body. These distinctive, yet complementary, strategies both critique and memorialize the poet's native country, while paying homage especially to village women who contribute the most to collective values, and the dead, whose anonymity transcends ethnic, religious, and national identities.

The collective in Khoury-Ghata's poetry often represents an imaginary community inspired by her mother's native village, Bcharré, located in north Lebanon. In an interview, the poet describes this village as "the place that opened the doors of imagination before me, the peasants, life in nature, the earth" (Mazo 28). The first part of this section will focus on the poet's satiric interpretation of village life in the verse of "Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse," published in the collection *Elle dit* (1998). Although Khoury-Ghata's entire oeuvre is principally inspired by her Lebanese roots, this verse is perhaps distinguished by being one of the first to explicitly represent her affiliation with Arab and, more specifically, Lebanese language and culture. It is perhaps

significant that the publication date of this verse coincides with that of her autobiographical novel Une Maison au bord des larmes, a revealing portrait of family and village life during her childhood. As I suggested in a preceding chapter, perhaps due to the death of family, or the retrospection that accompanies aging, Khoury-Ghata was comfortable with the notion of writing and publishing more revelatory texts.

In a different vein, Khoury-Ghata's depiction of the collective sometimes implies a larger and more extensive community, that of the dead, whether evoking deceased family members or victims of Lebanon's wars. In her poetry, the dead mirror the living. [They] "se nourrissent de l'odeur de notre pain, boivent les vapeurs de nos sources, vivent sur notre vacarme" (Mazo 28). Resisting any allusion to morbidity or fear, the poet insists that "Les morts n'ont rien de malfaisant."<sup>152</sup> We will observe how Khoury-Ghata's representation of the dead evolves to encompass a more inclusive community by examining verses that appeared several decades apart in the three collections Les Ombres et leurs cris (1979), Monologue du mort (1986), and Les Obscurcis (2008). They constitute somber, yet effusive, tributes to the collective dead, be they anonymous victims of war's brutal violence or family members overtaken by time's quiet stealth.

#### The Distorted Collective in "Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse" (1998)

This sequence of nineteen poems (approximately 250 verses) resembles an album of villagers' portraits representing Lebanon's multi-confessional socio-economic mosaic.

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<sup>152</sup> The poet describes death in the documentary film, Vénus Khoury-Ghata: Un Français aux saveurs de l'Orient.

It is significant that the poem is dedicated to Khoury-Ghata's friend and collaborator, the surrealist Chilean artist known as Matta, whose artwork explores the elasticity of capricious figures in a fantastic landscape.<sup>153</sup> Similar to her *ekphrasis* rendering of the alphabet in "Les mots," Khoury-Ghata's villagers are caricatured as men and women whose habits and behavior defy logic and reason thanks to the common devices of satire, namely, hyperbole, exaggeration, distortion, innuendo, ambiguity, and double meaning. Readers of Boccaccio's Decameron, the renowned fourteenth-century collection of tales depicting Florentine society during the black plague, will recognize some themes, such as criticism of church institutions, the role of hazard, class system, deference accorded to men of letters, libidinous behavior, superstitions, and the use of pseudonyms and numerology.<sup>154</sup>

Khoury-Ghata's American translator Marilyn Hacker proposes another medieval source with Arab origins, which is that of "zajal," a form of vernacular Arabic verse which dates back to twelfth-century Muslim Spain.<sup>155</sup> Reviewing our discussion of "zajal" in Chapter 4 in the context of Khoury-Ghata's representation of the Arabic alphabet, we note that Arab literary critic Adnan Haydar describes Lebanese "zajal" as a multi-formed vernacular discourse used in or for performance to the accompaniment of music.<sup>156</sup> The "zajjal" (performer) is celebrated for his/her verbal virtuosity that

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<sup>153</sup> She refers to Matta as "M" in La Maison aux orties.

<sup>154</sup> Introduction to Boccaccio's Décameron, Editions Livre Poche, 1999.

<sup>155</sup> Hacker on "Vénus Khoury-Ghata", Aujourd'hui Poème, 2002.

<sup>156</sup> Haydar, 189-219.



represents themes such as love, licentiousness, satire, jokes, aphorisms, and sermons. At village gatherings, various audience members may contribute anecdotes and embellishments to a performance. Furthermore, radical statements, political dissent and social criticism are sanctioned and encouraged at "zajal" competitions. Even some lyrics of the Maronite Catholic church incorporate the "zajal"'s vernacular structure. While Khoury-Ghata's free verse does not appear to respect the "zajal"'s rhyme and metric structure, it decidedly celebrates its vernacular form, emphasizing verbal and syntactical virtuosity and popular themes in the context of satire and criticism.

The use of satire in the framework of Decameron and "zajal" evokes the discussion in "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" in Moi's The Kristeva Reader (36-41) of the "carnavalesque" established as a discourse that "breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest" (36). Drawing on Bakhtin's notion of narrative discourse, the "carnavalesque" implies an inversion of the status quo. Rabelais is proposed as a practitioner of Bakhtin's notion of the "carnavalesque." In fact, Rabelais figures as a writer who inspired Khoury-Ghata according to her essay, "Pourquoi j'écris en Français" (21). Her use of the rhetoric of inversion and her defiance of linguistic and social conventions may be interpreted as expressing the "carnavalesque."

At first glance, the structure of "Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse" suggests the illusion of stability and uniformity. On each page, the verses are organized into three stanzas, whose lengths range from couplets to nine lines, with slightly variable

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syllable counts. Each villager's portrait, or vignette, is usually limited to one group of verse, although some portraits are more expansive, suggesting the weight of the subject's importance. The syntax of verses is organized for the most part in complete sentences; however, characteristic of Khoury-Ghata's poetry, there is no punctuation. This contributes to the flow of the narrative by nearly seamlessly linking one portrait to the next and produces the effect of a non-stop tongue-wagging gossip session about village personalities, whose activities become progressively more ridiculous with each telling. However, each portrait is sufficiently self-contained so that the absence of one would not significantly change the overall effect of the collective representation. In this manner, the poem's narrative structure could be described as adopting, on a much smaller scale, a frame narrative, which is characteristic of the Decameron and other medieval tales like One Thousand and One Nights.

The impact of the narrative relies on the figures' exaggerated traits and activities rather than dialogue. In fact, the limited interaction between figures hints at a lack of communication between the villagers; although an occasional overlapping and affiliation of some portraits with others evoke the necessary and, sometimes, messy relationships that link members of a community. While villagers' strange behavior and repugnant actions seem comic, they also palpitate with tension, affiliated implicitly or explicitly with thorny issues of religion, sex, class, politics, and language. Collective issues like the irrelevance of religious institutions, the weakness of political figures, emigration, colonization, war, marital problems, and sexual frustration are addressed. The source of these problems is, for the most part, clearly attributed to the male gender, whereas efforts

to maintain social cohesion are essentially represented as a woman's occupation.

While the structure of stanzas, at first glance, suggests uniformity, the title suggests the promise of pastoral verse. The number seven in the poem's title, "Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse," reflects the number of verses on the first page of the poem and invokes the sacred.<sup>157</sup> The notion of the sacred in the title is further linked to untamed nature, symbolized by the humble and sweet-smelling honeysuckle, a climbing plant that grows wild in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. Finally, the concepts of the sacred and nature are affiliated with wisdom. The title thus evokes three interlocking themes: the sacred, nature, and wisdom; however the tranquil benevolence evoked by these themes belies the weird and disturbing events that unfold in subsequent verses.

Mon village a trois cascades trois églises mais pas de curé  
Le dernier a suivi un corbeau qui croassait en araméen

Le temps dans mon village est si pressé que les femmes mettent  
bas en sept jours des enfants pas plus étriqués qu'ailleurs

Le fleuve de mon village rebrousse chemin vers sa source  
pour ne pas arroser le hameau voisin riche de trois voitures

et d'un saint embaumé qui attire les pèlerins (75)

The tripled expression "mon village" in the introduction underscores the poet's personal attachment to this place, whose identity as a traditional Christian enclave is both highlighted and mocked. The landscape of a Catholic village thus emerges, represented

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<sup>157</sup> As noted in Chapter 4, "arithmologie" is a major theme in the synthetic structure of the nocturnal regime. The numerals 3, 4, and 7 are particularly important in this poem.

by the abundance of water and churches, a crow cawing in Aramaic, one of the ancient languages of Christ, as well as the number three, evoking the Trinity. Phenomena consisting of a priest following a talking crow, women giving birth in seven days, and a river reversing its course, contribute to the depiction of a place where logic does not apply, and time and space are elastic. Moreover, the abundance of churches juxtaposing the absence of priests, and the image of wealth represented by three vehicles and an embalmed saint, produce an unflattering depiction of Catholic institutions. This proves to be the first of many in the poem.

Having briefly established the somewhat strange and impoverished status of this village, the poem introduces the first village inhabitants in another triple sequence.

Le cordonnier Mokhtar lit à l'envers le journal qui protège  
sa tête du soleil  
Wahiba la mendiante vide dans son pantalon à double fond  
la carafe de vin de la messe  
Maryam la veuve verte s'accouple avec tous les arbres qui passent (76)

Throughout the poem, numerous verses begin by identifying each villager by his or her first name. The names further identify the villagers as Arab (at least to readers who are familiar with Arab names), familiar in the sense that anonymous villagers would not produce the same effect. This contributes to the conceit of the vernacular narrative. Furthermore, the etymology of the names serves to reveal the villagers' confessional affiliations and their symbolic function in the narrative, sometimes to comic affect. For example, Mokhtar means "selected" or "chosen" in Arabic, which simultaneously

underscores his position as the first villager named in the narrative, while throwing into relief his humble vocation as a cobbler. Maryam, a common Christian name evoking the Virgin Mary, is ironically engaged in sexual activity with trees. The name Wahiba, translated as “the generous one,” juxtaposes her status as a beggar.

Not all of the villagers’ names are easily explained in symbolic terms; however, their mundane names do little to mask their odd behavior. The aforementioned stanza also juxtaposes a single man, sheltered literally by the press, symbolic of the Paternal order, with two female transgressors. Signifiers of inversion reinforce the layers of contradiction: Mokhtar’s newspaper is upside down and the first letter of the name Wahiba represents the upside down “M” of Mokhtar. Subsequent stanzas will demonstrate the subversive roles of Maryam and Wahiba. These figures thus welcome the reader to a village ravaged by inversion and subversion.

The sarcastic depiction of Catholic institutions is highlighted in numerous vignettes. Two monks traverse the village “avec leur clochette et leur encensoir fumant”. Laouza’s belly is “blessed” by the archbishop. Especially provocative is a pathetic portrayal of Christ who rummages around in the garbage to find a nail that had pierced his flesh:

Le Christ en guenilles qui fouillait la poubelle de Morcos le  
 menuisier cherchait le cinquième clou qui perça sa hanche  
 L’homme qui marchait dans sa mort depuis deux mille ans fut  
 pourchassé par les chiens et les cloches jusqu’à l’église où il  
 s’agenouilla devant un cierge qui pleurait sa cire sur les pieds  
 d’un crucifié (89)

This dark interpretation of the messianic narrative, which recalls Durand's discussion of the symbol of "le Fils" in synthetic structures of the nocturnal order, opposes the traditional one of Christ's triumphant return. The stream of verse in the imperfect tense suggests that History has habitually ignored the venerated Christian figure, reduced instead to a humiliated vagabond. In other words, the original significance of Christ's sacrifice has been lost.

While Christ is portrayed as a wretched figure without refuge, saints become the targets of derision and crude humor. The daily appearances of saint Antoine in the wells of Arbid, "le hérétique," provoke the "sarcasm of clouds" while "l'avare Mantouf" distributes his chestnuts between his pigs and an embalmed Armenian saint, who excretes them. These images of desecration support the prevailing rhetoric of inversion. The latter two actions also evoke the digestive reflexes of the nocturnal order as well as oral and anal drives affiliated with Kristeva's notion of the semiotic.

While Christian referents are abundant, Judaism and Islam are less frequently represented, but in caricature. Jacob, evoking the Jewish patriarch, dreams of horses galloping on the synagogue's roof, and Rachel, evoking the Biblical wife, prepares duck in balsamic. Mordoché, "le coiffeur," illicitly cuts hair on the sabbath. One Muslim merchant traces his ancestry to the pit of a date "jadis mangée" by the Muslim prophet Muhammad. These images allude to the coexistence in the village of the three faiths of the Book. Other verses, however, suggest the combined negative influence of religious leaders by evoking the cliché about the meeting of a priest, a rabbi, and an imam. In the following two couplets, their plucked beards produce three inverted trees that ironically

shelter “the devil’s house”.

Le curé le rabbin et l’imam conviés à la table du pauvre  
lui apportèrent trois poils de leur barbe qu’il planta dans son jardin

Les trois arbres inversés qui poussèrent neuf mois plus tard  
ombragèrent la maison du diable (86)

While many portraits serve to desecrate religious, specifically Catholic, institutions, others demonstrate the villagers’ attachment to superstitions. Massouda, “la sage,” tells fortunes with her cards. The hairdresser Mordoché paints a devil on his door to repel burglars. Rachel, on the other hand, never closes her door out of fear that it will keep good fortune from entering. The milk of Laouza’s ewe turns black after a lizard gives her the evil eye. Mantouf turns stingier after the devil “pisses” in his breadbox. Collectively, these descriptions suggest that Khoury-Ghata’s villagers put more stock in pagan beliefs than in institutional dogma.

In addition to satirizing the church and its representatives, verses criticize the village socio-economic hierarchy. Apart from their names, the village men, in particular, are identified by their vocations, which range from the base of the socioeconomic ladder, represented by Rassoul, “le mendicant,” to its summit, such as Khalil “qui fit fortune dans la vente du foin.” According to Arab etymology, Rassoul means “messenger” and Khalil means “friend.” Most villagers are identified as humble artisans, i.e. Mokhtar, the cobbler, Morcos, the cabinet-maker, and Youssef, the cemetery guard. The accentuation of these modest professions represents a strategy of inversion that promotes the humble

and deflates the noble. The poem gently mocks Amine, who is so wealthy that seven different colored salts adorn his table. Moreover, the poem also exposes the pomposity of political authority. The mayor, curiously nameless, exercises his power by prohibiting goats from grazing on the French alphabet and trees from sitting in their own shade in the village square. His incompetence is demonstrated by his overturning a “flock” of schoolboys with his Ford. In a similar fashion, the vanity of an anti-colonialist, accorded the honorific title of “Monsieur,” is deflated by the comparison of his hat, a symbol of the Ottoman empire, to a single poppy petal, and the attribution of his medals to his victory over a beehive.

Monsieur Antoun dort avec son tarbouche pour narguer  
le colonisateur français  
De loin on le prendrait pour un coquelicot à un seul pétale  
Les décorations qui tapissent la veste de son pyjama sont méritées  
il sortit vainqueur de la bataille qui l’opposa à toute une ruche  
après avoir frotté le nez du bourdon (88)

On the other hand, the cruel Khalil is saved by sheer luck. After “lashing the clouds” with his whip, Khalil survives a bombing while washing up, miraculously landing on his feet without spilling a drop of water. References to the American car manufacturer Ford, the Ottoman empire, colonialism, and bombs, remind the reader that the verses are framed by particular historical narratives that integrate aspects of imperialism, colonialism, and American capitalism. In addition, Lenin and Siberia are cited for historical context in the portrait of Rahil, a Communist, who sews garments for the masses. Mocking particular villagers serves to demythologize these grand and



secular ideas that were supposed to contribute to a prosperous and peaceful modern Lebanon

The accumulated flaws of village men are tempered by the virtues of two schoolmasters. Our study of the male figure in Chapter 6 notes that Khoury-Ghata has a habit of favorably portraying teachers in her poetry and novels. Although a former instructor named Mantouf is uncharacteristically portrayed as an unfaithful husband “qui dort avec le ruisseau,” two instructors named Farhoud and Zakzouq serve as model masculine figures. In a manner that resembles the personification of Arabic letters in “Les mots,” discussed in Chapter 4, one long series of verse here pays tribute to the poet’s maternal language, Arabic, whose alphabet Farhoud tests on himself before administering it to children:

La lettre Aleph n’est pas fiable  
 “Mim” est une chamelle fervente écoutant le muezzin  
 “Ba” préfère la confiture au dictionnaire  
 “Sin” une cafetière à l’oreille percée  
 “Zah” grince des essieux depuis que “tah” écrase son orteil  
 “Tah” s’apprend en position allongée debout lui est néfaste (86)

This playful and childlike recitation of the Arabic alphabet lends itself to symbolic interpretation. The first two letters of the Arabic alphabet, Aleph and Ba, are separated here by the letter “Mim” perhaps because Aleph and “Mim” form the Arabic word for mother, pronounced “Um,” thus celebrating the link between language and the maternal figure. Personified letters adopt the capricious behavior of villagers and objects. The anthropomorphic expression of the “pious female camel listening to the muezzin”

serves, somewhat irreverently, as a cultural signifier, alluding to Arabic's Islamic heritage and desert origins, as well as perhaps the subservient status of women in that context.

Farhoud's contemplation of particular Arabic letters reflects the care and attention of a poet. His geography lesson is equally eloquent and amusing, when he expresses in metaphors the declaration that Asia Minor "n'est que la soeur cadette de l'Asie majeure / et les pôles une invention d'ours mal inspiré". Zakzouk's reflection is similarly poetic in that he holds in esteem books whose wings carry them "plus haut que les fontaines / vers l'alphabet clignotant des étoiles qui ressemblent à des grains de cumin". This lyrical interpretation of literature and language as cosmic and terrestrial (vegetal) elements represents a rare moment – a lyrical pause -- in the poem when irony and derision are absent. Going back to the origins of language, it is implied, restores the beauty and purity of words, otherwise sullied and mutilated by a violent misogynic society.

In comparison with the village men, the village women are represented in a more sympathetic manner. Aside from their domestic prowess, the real power in the village lies in the hands of the narguila-smoking sage, Massouda, whose portrait occupies two stanzas. Etymology reveals that her name means "good fortune," recalling the theme of fortune/hasard in the Decameron. Massouda predicts the change in weather and politics; her cards announce an invasion of locusts and, more significantly, the mayor's downfall. In comparison with Maroun, whose name evokes the Catholic Maronite sect, and who is described as having taken up lying, Massouda's cards "ne mentent jamais." She also has the ear of the archbishop whose Mass she controls "en faisant grincer son banc."

While Massouda holds sway in political and religious domains, other women assume social responsibilities. Rahil the Communist, Philoména, and Mantouf's wife, knit and sew clothes for the needy. Khaoula, hyperbolically characterized as having enormous breasts and thighs, and "un entrejambe de maréchal des logis avec des poils aussi / drus que des allumettes", becomes a village heroine when she extinguishes a fire in the henhouse without wetting the rooster's tail. The portrait of the novice prostitute, Magida, who evokes the Biblical figure of Mary Magdelene, also merits two stanzas. Her inherent goodness is symbolized by her wielding a lamp that chases away the fog. Her sole vice is that she calls God "par son prénom / ignorant qu'il pouvait se fâcher".

On the other hand, village women suffer from physical affliction or humiliation, such as Laouza, who suffers from a bad back, and Antoun's wife, "shat upon" by a pigeon. Women also articulate the wisdom of the verses' title by uttering somber adages. According to Maryam: "C'est grâce au poussin qui crie que le renard trouve la poule". Massouda claims: "Les chemins qui traversent les rêves d'autrui ne mènent nulle part". Wahiba, the beggar, who appears in a total of three stanzas, exemplifies the humble feminine. While her act of sacrilege was recounted at the beginning of the text, the following more favorable portrayal links her to the land and the maternal language, Arabic.

Le sort du néflier de Wahiba est-il lié à l'indépendance du pays  
Sera-t-il le même traduit en français  
et répondra-t-il à un nom qui ne conviendra peut-être pas  
à ses branches habituées à dialoguer avec le vent arabe qui  
repousse automne d'un mois pour lui permettre de comptabiliser

ses feuilles (90)

Interrogating the consequences of Lebanon's independence and the hazards of translation, those verses allude to the status of Arabic as Lebanon's native tongue, opposing the non-native French language. The dialogue between the medlar tree and the "Arab" wind, which accommodates nature's calendar, symbolizes the role of vernacular Arabic and the link between the female figure, the maternal language, and nature.

The narrative of the Decameron is organized so that the "bad" at the beginning is rehabilitated at the end. This corresponds to a pattern of inversion that is common in Khoury-Ghata's nocturnal universe, which accords the most humble element the most valuable position. In this manner, the final verses are devoted to the beggar, Wahiba. While the beginning of the text depicts her emptying the Mass wine into her pants, the final stanza, which terminates with her utterance, alludes to her innocence with a description of snowfall:

Wahiba ne croise jamais ses jambes de peur d'emmêler ses pensées  
 La neige dit-elle ne tombe que pour couvrir les déplacements  
 des loups en route pour le monastère où jamais ne pénètre la lune  
 si grande sa crainte d'être prise pour une hostie (93)

Those final verses, as a single group on the last page, underscore the marginalized status of the humble woman, whose superstitions oppose religious dogma. Referring to the moon's fear reiterates one of the poem's underlying themes, which is the feminine aversion/phobia of an exclusively masculine Catholic institution.

Consistent with our observation of poems in preceding chapters of this study, we note that gender relations represent one of the principal tensions that mark these verses. Sexual frustration, it is implied, causes the newly widowed Maryam to seek out trees and sleep with “un ruisseau à sept queues,” but there are other villagers whose sexual preferences are equally extraordinary. Rahil’s son, for example, sleeps with his goat. Mantouf sleeps with a stream while his wife shares her bed with “une bouteille de vinaigre”. Both the milkman, whose lust for Rachel is symbolized by a shotgun, and the beggar Rassoul, who pines for Laouza, symbolize unrequited love. In addition, the shepherdess Maha travels thousands of kilometers “pour atteindre le rêve d’Ali” who slams “la porte de son sommeil” in her face. Demonstrating another act of masculine cruelty, Maroun departs for America, leaving his wife “accroché à un clou,” which evokes the image of Christ hanging on the Cross. In contrast with these disturbing depictions of desire and marital relations, one illustration of a couple reveals the redemptive possibility of love.

Philoména a cessé de coucher avec tous les mâles qui passent  
depuis que le peintre Marzouk a donné ses traits à l’ange du vitrail  
elle craint de froisser ses ailes (78)

Attributing the woman’s traits to an angel alludes to the sacred power of the artist who transforms the female figure into a celestial figure. It is perhaps not coincidental that the name Marzuq translates as “blessed” in Arabic and Philoména in Greek means “loved.” There is also a character in the Decameron named Filomena. The favorable

portrait of the painter also evokes the Khoury-Ghata's relationship with the artist Matta, to whom the poem is dedicated.

While local family relations, represented by Rahil and her son, Jacob and his daughter, and Mantouf and his wife, anchor the village itself, village dwellers' links to other countries and continents accentuate the extra-local dimension of their identities. While Maroun immigrated to America, Farhoud is described as speaking French "dans le sens du vent tels les moulins de Hollande." Farhoud also adopts three orphans, "trois ratons laveurs qui faisaient les poubelles à Montréal." Laouza's parakeets from India wait for the postman to bring "nouvelles de leurs cousins de New Delhi." Mounir claims to be "le cousin du chameau qui s'envola entre Zanzibar / et Madagascar." These whimsical, mostly anthropomorphic, portrayals of connections to Europe, North America, South Asia, and Africa illustrate the villagers' exotic worldliness, and allude to the Lebanese dispersion to all corners of the world. While the sequence of verses expresses the message that human interaction remains problematic, its incorporation of international geographical references underscores the inevitable and compelling link between the local and the global. In other words, the horizon of the collective extends well beyond village boundaries.

In conclusion, while this microcosmic portrait of a multi-confessional village pays homage to Khoury-Ghata's Lebanese origins and the "zajal" storytelling tradition, the accumulated exaggerated traits and outrageous behavior of village figures effectively represent a distorted collective, signified essentially by symbols of inversion. The verses do not disguise criticism of a phallogocentric system, especially that evoked by the

institution of the Catholic church. Khoury-Ghata confirms her aversion to Christian and other religious dogma in the context of her comments about the confessional strife in Lebanon: “I hate religions, they produce all this fanaticism.”<sup>158</sup> With the exception of teachers who maintain a privileged relationship with the maternal language, village men tend to serve as negative models, whose vanity, frailties, lust, and violence, harm the collective. In opposition, village women serve as mediators, whose attachments to nature, domesticity, and traditional wisdom, contribute to the community and maintain collective values.

The villagers in “Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse,” who are distinguished by gender, socio-economic status, and religion, are also divided in death. The village boasts two cemeteries, “un cimetière à ciel ouvert pour l’été / un autre pour l’hiver si vaste que les morts s’y allongent / jambes écartées / tels des pharaons”(76). The cemetery guard Youssef ironically observes, however, that death can be the great equalizer: “personne n’est à / son avantage / on a besoin de plus mort que soi pour pavoiser” (78). As we have observed, dichotomies, represented here by the double and the rehabilitation of the dead, are critical to the structure and topos of Khoury-Ghata’s oeuvre. In this context, the next section will examine Khoury-Ghata’s representation of the dead as a collective force.

### Resurrecting the Collective in Three Poems on the Subject of Death

Preceding chapters of this study have demonstrated how Khoury-Ghata erases the

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<sup>158</sup> Hassofferet

boundaries that separate life from death, a principal theme that reverberates in both her novels and poetry. A glance at some titles is indicative of her obsession with the collective dead: Les Ombres et leurs cris, Vacarme pour une lune morte, Les morts n'ont pas d'ombre, Mortemaison, Privilège des morts. "La mort: pain quotidien des Libanais," the poet declares in the preface to Anthologie Personnelle. In interviews, she asserts: "Nous sommes les morts,"<sup>159</sup> and elucidates: "Je fais de la mort un espace de la vie" (Mazo 28). Khoury-Ghata's mythopoeic treatment of the collective dead is particularly interesting given that the poetic form of elegy, known in Arabic as "ritha," represents one of the few modes of poetry that Arab women, traditionally absent from the public arena of poetry, have practiced since pre-Islamic times.<sup>160</sup> Given Khoury-Ghata's Lebanese origins, we consider Durand's discussion of the Levantine origins of the myth of death in the context of the nocturnal regime: "Le très ancien mythe de la souffrance, de la mort et de la résurrection de Tammuz trouve des échos dans le monde paléo-oriental" (339). Salma Khadra Jayyusi observes that the myth of Tammuz and Ishtar was used in Arabic creative writing at least as early as Khalil Gibran's work "Liqa", which appeared in 1914, and it manifests a profound influence on modern Arabic poetry.<sup>161</sup>

Cohabitation of the living and the dead is consistent with the nocturnal regime's principle of rehabilitating the dead and the magical realist strategy of not respecting the

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<sup>159</sup> Internaute Week-end.

<sup>160</sup> Handal notes that women poets from pre-Islamic times to the twentieth century were known for writing elegies (2).

<sup>161</sup> Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry, (London: Brill, 1997) : 120. As we observed in Chapter 2, Eliot's representation of myth in the context of sacrificial death inspired a generation of Arab poets in the mid-twentieth century.



frontiers that separate real and fantastic worlds. Subordinate to the structure of the nocturnal regime is the drama of synthetic myth, whose aim is to mediate “la terreur devant le temps qui fuit, l’angoisse devant l’absence, et l’espérance en l’accomplissement du temps” (Durand 339). This is accomplished via the “médiation des contraires” and the “rehabilitation du mal” (336). As preceding chapters of this study have revealed, in the context of the synthetic drama, which represents the nocturnal themes of sacrifice and resurrection, "le Fils" assumes the principal role. Durand, like many scholars of myth, underscores the correspondence between the messianic narrative and the myth of Tammuz. We have also observed that Khoury-Ghata’s oeuvre reflects her attachment to images of a crucified and resurrected Christ figure, examples of which were found in “Les sept brins de chèvrefeuille de la sagesse.” The theme of resurrection is also represented by the myth of Osiris, which figures among the symbols and themes of the nocturnal mystical structures.

The subsequent analysis will examine verses that represent the community of the dead in several collections of Khoury-Ghata’s poetry. Les Ombres et leurs cris appeared in 1979 and received the Prix Apollinaire the following year. According to the poet, it articulates “la mort collective”, or as critic Michael Bishop describes it, “death in broad psychological and emotional terms, the realm of ‘shadows and screams’” (87). Moreover, this collection employs the nocturnal rhetoric of euphemism to represent the violence unleashed by the Lebanese civil war, which began in 1975. Monologue du mort, published in 1986 and awarded the Prix Mallarmé in 1987, expresses what the poet declares in her introduction to Mon Anthologie as “la résignation après la révolte et le

bras tendu vers Dieu dans un geste vengeur.” In effect, these verses reflect the poet’s attempt to both reconcile with her husband’s unexpected death and tensions in Lebanon.

A modest selection of verses from both of these collections appears in Mon Anthologie (1993), and in Anthologie personnelle (1997), the latter of which will serve as our primary reference here. Many of the verses were modified in the two anthologies. In some cases, verses are arranged in a different order, and some words, expressions, verses, and spaces have been replaced, added, or suppressed. While Anthologie personnelle prefaces each chapter of verse with the name and editor of the collection from which verses are extracted, accompanied by the publication date, and prize awarded, the reader is not informed that selected verses are, in fact, extracted from much longer poems, and have sometimes been altered.

Michael Bishop suggests that Khoury-Ghata's successive modifications represent the poem as an expression of "devenir," a reflection of the poet’s personal evolution. Echoing Bishop’s observation, one could argue that her inclination to modify her verse evokes the method of poet Francis Ponge, who favored representing his writing as a work in progress, the notion of which is represented by his prose and verse in La Rage de l’expression. It is evident that Khoury-Ghata’s poetry as a whole celebrates the power of metamorphosis, whether it involves the structure or theme of her verse. Nevertheless, verses in the poet’s later collections reveal less traces of modification, perhaps due to requirements imposed by different editors and publishers. While taking into account the original versions of three poems, the following analysis will deal primarily with verses as they appear in Anthologie personnelle, which represents to this date the final and

definitive version of these particular verses. They retain the essence of the original verses that Khoury-Ghata wanted to preserve in anthology form, given that the original collections are no longer in print and difficult to find.

Our analysis will conclude with the poem, “Les Obscurcis,” adopting the title of the collection published in 2008 (“Les Obscurcis” is one of two new sequences of verse in the collection, which otherwise includes previously published work.). This poem is dedicated to the poet Claude Esteban, who died in 2006. In an interview, Khoury-Ghata implies that the poem was written as a gesture of solidarity: “C’est une réponse au poème de Claude Esteban ‘Je suis le mort’. Moi, je lui dis ‘Nous sommes les morts’”.<sup>162</sup> The poetry of Esteban, a celebrated contemporary poet who was bilingual in French and Spanish, represents a profound reflection on death, a response to his wife’s unexpected death and his own decline. The following examination of Khoury-Ghata’s representation of the dead in three of her collections will allow us to assess the evolution of her style over the course of three decades. It will also reveal how the poet’s desire to rehabilitate death reconfigures the dead as a collective.

#### “Ils” in Les Ombres et leurs cris

The title of the introductory poem, “Ils,” immediately assigns a subject to the “shadows” and “cries” announced by the collection’s title, Les Ombres et leurs cris. (A subsequent section of verses is entitled “Corps écrits”). This link between the collection’s title and the poem’s title produces a plethora of plural nouns, while giving

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<sup>162</sup> L’internaute.

dark forms and piercing voices to anonymous collective figures. The subsequent subtitle, “Peuple voué aux lentes predictions,” only vaguely identifies who “they” are, but suggests a traditional community given to slow rhythms and superstitions.

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 Ils racontent leur vie aux pierres  
 Se disent venus d’un hiver  
 Montrent une poignée de froid pour toute identité

This initial sequence underscores the nocturnal and synthetic symbolism of the triad (three lines and third person plural) and accords the plural pronoun “ils” an active voice, that of a group of storytellers narrating their autobiography to an audience of stones. This establishes another link between the two collectives: speakers and listeners. The fixed characteristic of stone juxtaposes the mobility of “they” who describe themselves as “venus d’un hiver.” The subjects are thus portrayed as coming from a cold place evocative of death, but more significantly, they assume the supernatural role of active communicators.<sup>163</sup>

In Anthologie personnelle, the title “Ils” and the enumeration of verses disappears; however, the subtitle, “Peuple voué aux lentes prédictions” remains. The first sequence is composed of different verses, followed by the slightly altered original first sequence:

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<sup>163</sup> In Mon Anthologie this sequence of verses switches positions with the fifth sequence of verses. Other modifications include changing two letters to lower case and replacing “venus d’un hiver” with “citoyens de l’hiver”.

Ils s'infiltrant par les fissures de la nuit  
 allument nos fleuves  
 troublent nos viviers  
 nous laissent leurs ombres de silex en signe de défi

Ils racontent leur vie aux pierres  
 se disent venus de l'hiver  
 montrent une poignée de froid pour toute identité (125)

Unlike the original first sequence of verses which avoids reference to the first person plural, this modified version establishes the relationship between two collectives: "Ils" and "nous," symbolically linking the dead to the living. The theme of the collective is reinforced by the sequence of plural nouns: "fissures," "fleuves," "viviers," and "ombres." In addition, the dead are depicted as asserting their presence among the living by "lighting up our rivers" and "disturbing our ponds." In spite of their status as the vanquished "ombres de silex en signe de défi," their influence on "our" physical world is tangible.

The pervasive and active presence of the dead is expressed by a strategy of anaphora represented by the verbal phrase "Ils + verb" that begins many of the lines throughout the 58-verse poem. This pattern of pragmatographia-like description produces a measured cadence that accentuates the dominant and unchanging status of the third person plural, whose actions are represented by diverse verbs in the present tense, suggesting ceaseless mobility.

Many actions, whether attributed to "us" or "them" are linked to the oral and articulation in the context of violence and death. On the one hand, words of the dead are victims of "our" pulverization: "Dans les mortiers du soir / nous pilons leurs mots

coutumiers avec l'amande amère". On the other hand, behaving like a recruiting militia, "they" provoke others' outbursts: "Ils enrôlent les arbres / qu'ils arment de cris" (trees usually represent masculine figures in Khoury-Ghata's verse) and "se présentent à nos portes / se nomment dans un cri". Their words betray them: "[Ils] peignent de noir leur langue trahie" and express the consequences of violence: "ils parlent de chevaux morts et de prairies blessées". Perhaps, more significantly, "They" are victims who will, in turn, victimize others. "S'ils sont fusillés / blanches sont les traces de leur sang". While the white traces of blood suggest innocence, the following verses imply their guilt:

[...]  
 Ils interrogèrent un nuage accroupi sur le toit  
 un oiseau suspect qui change souvent d'adresse  
 torturèrent le châtaigner

qui ouvrit ses branches en formes d'ailes  
 puis s'éloigna dans son sang

Ils enrôlent la lune  
 qu'ils arment de cris  
 tirent sur la pluie  
 les morts ne sont que flaques d'eau

This parallel construction of acts against nature, including the interrogation of a cloud and a bird, shooting at the rain, and implicating the moon, uses euphemism to describe militia activities that occurred during the Lebanese civil war. The most vivid image, represented by the tortured chestnut tree spreading his branches "like wings," before fleeing in his own blood, symbolizes the sacrificial "Fils" central to the synthetic myth of Durand's nocturnal order.

Although precise cultural referents are rarely seen in Khoury-Ghata's early poems, the following verses depict a Muslim house of worship, whose upside down prayers signify an act of sacrilege that parallels that of "de-feathering" the moon. The description of inverted prayers, evoking the nocturnal dynamic of inversion, suggests a world gone awry due to inter-confessional strife.

Ils plument la lune  
dispersent son duvet au-dessus des mosquées  
leurs prières inversées se transforment en rumeur (126)

The image of violence recurs when a body "se volatise avec la détonation," then the menace becomes more terrifying in another insidious form: [ils] "pénètrent dans nos peaux dans un bruit de reptile." In the original poem, the eroticism of the same verse is more explicit: [ils] "glissent leurs sexes dans nos coeurs / Dans un bruit de reptiles". The verses terminate by abandoning euphemism to accentuate death's raw finality: "Quand ils consentent à mourir / Ils abandonnent leur peau au premier tournant du chemin". The grim destiny of the collective is thus represented by the mutilation and metamorphosis of "their" bodies, whose imploding violence threatens "our" own body.

Some verses from the original collection of Les Ombres et leurs cris are dedicated to the poet René Char. In Anthologie personnelle, they appear as the first sequence featured in the chapter devoted to "Les Ombres et leurs cris." The poem begins with subordinate clauses as if to provide an explanation in response to a question:

Parce qu'ils ont hésité entre la rose et l'ombre  
 parce qu'ils ont chargé leurs fusils de pluie  
 ils sont morts d'oubli (123)

The third person plural thus remains the principal subject, accentuated by the anaphora of “parce qu'ils ont” in the first two lines; however, this time the verbs are expressed in the past perfect. Consequently, the dead are represented as a reticent collective, hesitating between what could be described as “contraires chariens.” The rose and the shadow, half of which echoes the collection's title, symbolize the fragility of life and death. The juxtaposition of guns and rain in the second line reiterates the juxtaposition. No longer actively violent warriors or victims portrayed in the preceding poem, “they” have been disarmed by death and memory. The next sequence of verse takes on a more declarative tone, accentuated by the inversion of the verb, in present tense, and the subject.

Ne meurent que les crédules  
 qui abritent sous leur toit des nuages étrangers  
 écrivent leur visage sur la buée des villes  
 étreignent un canon  
 suivent un grenadier

Ne meurent que les naïfs qui saignent avec coquelicot (123)

The near parallel construction of the first and last lines of this sequence with their topos of death encloses the three middle verses, producing the effect of a tomb, whose dead are reproached for being gullible and naive about the menace of “nuages étrangers,” which alludes to Lebanon's Palestinian refugees, whose volatile status is often cited as



having provoked the civil war. The tandem of the poppy and victims of war evoke the former couple of the rose and shadow.

A despairing tone, reinforced by the alliteration of subjunctive phrases in the last three lines, alludes to the violence of time.

Ils meurent tous les soirs  
quand les heures s'alignent  
qu'elles deviennent couteau entre les lèvres des horloges  
quand la lumière dans leur bouche se tait (123)

The eery synesthesia of “the light in their mouth” going silent stands in contrast to the cries and shouts evoked in the first poem. While the first poem, “Ils,” represents the collective, both perpetrators and victims engaged in the throes of violence, the second poem, untitled, represents the collective as a lost cause turned mute.

“Ils” in Monologue du mort

Like Les Ombres et leurs cris, the original Monologue du mort opens with the poem “Ils;”<sup>164</sup> however, the version in Anthologie personnelle begins with three verses from another collection, Fables pour un peuple d’argile. It is especially significant that the verses immediately establish a direct relationship between the narrator and a dead figure. In this manner, the poet highlights her role as a “médiatrice” on familiar terms with the dead.

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<sup>164</sup>Subsequent sections of the poem are entitled: “Composé sur une photo d’André Naggar,” “Maisons Basses,” “Un lieu d’eau sous la voûte,” and “Sommeil blanc.”

Tu dis lorsqu'il t'arrive de mourir  
 l'obscurité n'effraie que la nuit  
 quand les morts peureux retiennent leur noire respiration<sup>165</sup> (87)

This 80-verse poem is divided into 18 small stanzas, whose lengths vary from one to nine lines. Its structure is very similar to “Ils” in Les Ombres et leurs cris in that it depends on the anaphor of “Ils + verb in the present tense,” which launches every stanza with the exception of one. In addition, many of the subsequent lines in each stanza begin with verbal clauses. This produces the effect of a collective in action, engaged in a flurry of various activities, which range from the mundane to the extraordinary. The first stanza evokes the familiar image of phantoms, under the moon’s influence, which haunt our imaginations with their violence and destruction.

Ils flottent à la surface de la mémoire  
 s’infiltrèrent dans les murs avec les lunaisons  
 égorgent l’eau  
 démantèlent les pendules (88)

More violence is represented by images of the dead, who tie up the arms of the cypress tree, wake children, and upend sepulchers. They manifest their greediness by drinking rivers, eating the flesh of the jujube tree, and lapping marshes. Underscoring these images of violence is the pervasive infiltration of the dead, suggested by a hissing sound produced by the alliteration of the letter “s”. Examples are found in frequent

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<sup>165</sup>In the original Fables pour un peuple d’argile, the third verse reads: “et les morts peureux n’ont qu’à rester chez eux en retenant leur noire respiration”.

liaisons between “Ils” and verbs beginning with vowels, and the abundance of reflexive verbs: “ils s’élignent dans leur corps / se terrent dans leur chevilles”. Hissing is particularly evident in this sequence of four verses: Ils vont entre écorce et noyer / forcent les portes de novembre / percent l’oeil de la lucarne / signent nos miroirs de leurs buée” (89).

The crux of the poem lies in its representation of the link between “them” and “us” in the twentieth verse: “nous les cueillons sur le rebord des hanches / nous les faisons macérer dans nos sueurs / essorons leurs larmes / les séchons sur des cordes tendues sous terre” (88). The actions undertaken by the first person plural suggest a sympathetic, and even maternal, response to the violence. In response, the dead remain implacable, going so far as to inhabit “our” bodies: “dans nos sueurs”, “dans nos artères”, and “dans nos angles”.

Ils empruntent tous nos orifices  
empoignent nos pennes  
lapent le sel de nos crêtes  
nous souillent dans un cri (89)

The parallel construction that profiles the interaction between subject and object represents the constant struggle between “us” and “them”:

Ils nous inondent dans les creux  
nous les séchons à terre basse  
Ils nous vident de notre étreinte  
nous les remplissons de nos foulées (90)

Emphasizing the omnipotence of the dead, the poem terminates with an epithonema marked by alliteration: “Ils possèdent la planète en profondeur.”

“Les Obscurcis” in Les Obscurcis (2008)

Compared to the multiple representations of “Ils” in two collections and one anthology, the 195-verse poem “Les Obscurcis,” which introduces a collection of poems published under the same title, is distinguished by much longer lines, often exceeding 10 syllables, that are grouped into stanzas as long as 12 verses.<sup>166</sup> Like verses in “Ils,” the present tense drives the narrative, but the length of verses in this poem lends itself to a more complicated structure, replete with imperatives, interrogatives, and a variety of subordinate clauses. The poem’s complex structure and imagery of the living dead and their interlocutors reflect the imagination of a mature poet who has been exploring over the course of decades the frontiers that separate life from death.

Marking a clear departure from the posture of “Ils,” which gives prominence to the role of the third person plural, the first stanza here immediately implicates the first person plural, explicitly enunciated in three out of seven verses. The thrust of the collective “nous” lowers the barrier imposed in preceding poems by the third person plural between the “living” narrator (and the reader), on the one hand, and the “dead” subjects, on the other.

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<sup>166</sup> Nettles organizes “The Darkened Ones” into nineteen poems indicated by numerals.

Nous nous sommes exclus de l'espace informe de l'air  
 pour une terre soucieuse de combler ses excavations avec os  
 chiffons aboiements  
 nous avons perdu cette mobilité qui faisait de nous des choses  
 reconnaissables à leur contour  
 viables entre azote et asphalte  
 nous nous sommes décolorés (9)

Similar to the structure of verses dedicated to René Char, the parallel first and last lines produced by the anaphora “nous nous sommes” evoke the exterior of an enclosure, inside which verses two through six are contained as if in a tomb, occupied by the “exclus” who are described as shapeless and colorless. They issue a collective lament about the future of their vulnerable status: “on nous serra en fagots silencieux sans préciser / à quelle forêt nous appartenions” and clamor for refuge and nourishment: “Donnez-nous une boîte d’allumettes où nous réfugier / des pétales de fleurs pour nous nourrir”. According to their gloomy assessment, no one is capable of helping them:

personne n'a le bras assez long pour ouvrir à l'air souterrain  
 personne n'a l'énergie pour préparer la mue entre trépas et vie  
 personne n'a repéré le passage prohibé (10)

This forceful negative expression of a triad of anaphora “personne n'a” and the recurring alliteration of “p,” especially evident in the third verse, creates a protest of despair. The rhetoric of repetition reinforces the representation of the double, which supports Khoury-Ghata's notion of the dead as a reflection of the living. The anaphora that introduces the poem, “nous nous sommes”, serves as one example. The epizeuxis

“Nous glissons glissons avec la planète” suggests a certain slippery harmony between the collective dead and the universe. The recurrence of the expression “drap ou linceul qu’importe” suggests the lack of distinction between the living and the dead, who are bound by the notion that a reunion is possible. In fact, the dead contemplate the notion that “les obscurcis” refers just as readily to the living as it does to the dead: “peut-être sommes-nous arbres récalcitrants / forêt crayeuse / et ceux qui détiennent le jour sont des obscurcis” (13).

The rhetoric of the double also manifests itself by portraying the dead both comically and tragically. In a humorous vein, the dead categorize themselves as “nostalgiques,” who expect to retrieve their contours in the shape of garments “already evaporated,” “rêveurs,” who eagerly await mating season, “exigus,” who claim to have crossed oceans, and the “nouveaux venus,” who want to know what they left behind. The dead seem to resent their reputations as troublemakers who move furniture and disturb the tranquility of houses and their inhabitants. On the contrary, they think of themselves as well behaved and civilized: “nous sommes ceux qui écoutent” and communicative: “nous échangeons nos impressions avec d’autres obscurcis”. They are sensitive to what goes on above them while the young and innocent there remain oblivious to the invisible networks and tangible connections that link the living and the dead.

Les filles qui chevauchent la montagne à cru ignorent que les  
mêmes lignes se croisent sur nos cercueils et sur leur pain  
que nous bousculons les ténèbres pour que leur odeur d’orange  
s’infilte dans nos cavités  
que pourchassant nos corps nous nous pleurons en elles alors  
qu’elle croient nous pleurer (15)

More than midway through the poem, five stanzas are distinguished by their evocation of female figures similar to those depicted in “Elle dit.” Women’s gestures express sympathy and demonstrate their efforts to comprehend the signs left by the dead:

les femmes qui essorent larmes et oreillers nous prennent pour  
 duvet posé sur l’air  
 ce soir  
 avant de se couler contre les murs  
 elles déchiffreront les rayures de nos ongles sur leurs vitres (13)

In subsequent verses, these female figures are identified as “les essoreuses,” whose affiliation with water resembles that of laundresses in other verses. The “wringers” function as a kind of Greek chorus as they collectively “posent les mêmes questions,” all of which echo the same interrogative adverb:

Pourquoi avez-vous arraché le cheveu blanc de l’if?  
 pourquoi avez-vous épousé un seul arbre alors que vous pouvez  
 épouser toute une forêt?  
 et pourquoi les femmes qui vous ouvrent leur écorce vous  
 assignent une place entre la hache et l’âtre?  
 et pourquoi celles qui vous reconnaissent à votre humus crient  
 vos noms par temps de neiges et de questionnement? (14)

Like the mother who receives no answers to her persistent queries in Khoury-Ghata’s poem “Autour d’un cerisier,” the women’s collective interrogation of the dead resonates to no response. Identical to other female figures in Khoury-Ghata’s verse, the “wringers” carry out domestic chores in which the dead and the living, as well as terrestrial and celestial forms mingle. They “shelter water and children in their pitcher”

and the dead in their breadbox. They do not distinguish between bread that rises with the moon and bread baked by ash. Their wisdom about death expresses the rhythm of an old wives' incantation that intones the negative anaphor "le basilic ne" before inverting "basilic" and "ne" in the last verse of the stanza.

Les essoreuses disent le basilic exsangue les morts en pleine  
vigueur  
le basilic ne peut arrêter la mer  
le basilic ne sait écrire son nom  
ne sait pas qu'il s'appelle basilic (14)

Thus, the "wringers," like most female figures in Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre, and like the poet herself, represent privileged interlocutors with the dead. "Les Obscurcis" finishes with a coda that personifies the plural noun, "thresholds," signifying the fragile frontier that straddles life and death. When the dead renounce their status and become a wave of passersby, "Les seuils ne savent plus rattraper les chemins". The barrier between the living and the dead is transformed into a mobile and fluid passage, like a birth canal, and there's no turning back.

Like an Isis collecting Osiris' fragments, Khoury-Ghata thus reassembles the collective body, resurrecting in her verse anonymous victims of violence and time. Taking into account the three collections and their respective representations over the course of three decades, one observes that Khoury-Ghata's portrayal of the collective dead has become progressively less violent, and more articulate. Compared with the early depictions of "Ils," the dead of "Les Obscurcis" are equally active, but more



expressive and respectful of the world of the living. Unlike the dead in "Ils," who seem condemned to despair, they are not entirely resigned to their lot. In addition, the collective dead of "Les Obscurcis" exhibit a sense of humor, which is absent in the "Ils" poems. This contributes to the sublimation of their abject-ness. The dead are thus domesticated. Furthermore, a progressive transformation starting with the expression of the dead in the third person plural (Ils) and terminating with their being represented by the first person plural (nous) signifies both a rapprochement with the dead and a more inclusive portrait of them (and us). Finally, "Les Obscurcis" represents the elimination of the barrier between the living and the dead as a rebirth. This evolution over the course of three decades suggests the more mature poet's reconciliation with death.

### Conclusion

This two-part chapter reveals two distinct portraits of the collective that express the concept of community as collective figures in distress. The first portrait of a Lebanese village resembles Danièle Chauvin's notion of memoir in as much as it incorporates specific historical references; however its imaginative wit and satire take liberties with History to critique a collective identity. The second portrait evokes universal myths of death to restore a collective identity; however, it is closely linked to the history of Lebanon and the poet's personal experience. Both of these visions promote the mediating role of women who, by working for the community or communicating with the dead, protect and maintain collective values. Their role juxtaposes that of men, whose phallogentric patriarchal institutions perpetuate violence and create victims.

Khoury-Ghata's mythico-poetic approach aims to both highlight and mediate the violent tensions produced by multiple structures and themes of dichotomy, including myth and memoir. In this framework, her verse is represented as a conflicted yet cohesive structure that challenges the boundaries of poetic forms. In the same manner, her poetics strive to reconfigure a collective identity that transcends cultural and religious, as well as temporal and spatial barriers.

## Conclusion

### Expressing the Affirmative in Nocturnal and Negative Structures

Having examined poems representing four decades of Khoury-Ghata's career as a poet, my study will conclude with a reflection on nuances of the negative in verse published in her most recent collection, Les Obscurcis (2008). Characteristic of her verse, death is omnipresent in most of the poems in this sequence; however, its occasional absence creates a space liberated from the melancholy that haunts much of Khoury-Ghata's oeuvre. Sixteen poems appear under the title "12 juillet 2006," which alludes to the first day of the 2006 war in Lebanon provoked by South Lebanon-based Hizballah's attack on Israeli military forces across the border. We have observed how Khoury-Ghata's poetry has been marked by war and conflict in Lebanon.<sup>167</sup>

While the collective title of these poems promises a portrait of violence, only one poem in the sequence explicitly represents war. On the other hand, seven of the poems, nearly half of this sequence, evoke the figures of children, whose representation suggests, however subtly, a fragile hope for the future. In the eighteen-verse poem that addresses the familiar horrors of war, the word "guerre" recurs four times in a span of seven verses.<sup>168</sup> The first verse, which emphasizes the war's effect on women, offers the often-evoked portrait of the widow: "Le pont incendié ce matin menait à la veuve". In subsequent verses, a soldier dismisses women as "montures" and vigilant women sleep

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<sup>167</sup> In this case, Khoury-Ghata went public with scathing criticism of Israel's "objectifs" in an op-ed of the French daily Le Figaro on 10 August 2006. "[Israël] ne veut pas d'un Liban uni, fort, indépendant et souverain," she declared.

<sup>168</sup> This poem is dedicated to former French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin.

“debout comme le jonc” (27). As for children, they become “pâte à modeler” under their mother’s worried fingers. War is no longer a child’s game: “jadis ils jouaient à la guerre avant la guerre”. Death belongs to the present: “les élèves conjuguent le verbe mourir au présent” (27). An instructor buried under rubble represents the only male victim, thus terminating the poem's sequence of negative images that express the common places of war and its consequences.

Other poems in "12 juillet 2006" evoke children in a more playful manner as if they were figures in the staging of death. One poem represents children playing “osselets” near a cemetery (34). Another poem portrays the dead reflecting on children’s notion of clouds as “lambeaux de Dieu” (25). Still, under the dark rubric of "12 juillet 2006," two poems that evoke the figures of children completely embrace the life force. For instance, the following verses express the anticipation of an unusual birth:

Un garçon naîtra de l’union de l’asphodèle et de son ombre  
 vêtu de son écorce couleur trémière  
 entre perle de pigeon et matin premier  
 un garçon avec une clochette au bout de chaque orteil  
 ...  
 Un garçon qui rivalise de vitesse avec l’herbe  
 et sa salive miraculeuse pour cicatriser les genoux écorchés des  
 pierres (21)

The use of future tense, which is uncommon in Khoury-Ghata’s poetry, anticipates what is implied as the phenomenon of creation, generated by the fusion of flora and the nocturnal, and whose potency is reinforced by the nearly symmetrically placed anaphor “un garçon” as well as the alliteration of “v,” accentuated in the next to the last line. According to myth, the asphodel flower grows in Hades where it serves as

food for the dead. The delicate range of gray hues evokes the frontiers of the nocturnal and the last line suggests the power of supernatural healing by oral means. While the poem's subject, "un garçon," appears to personify a plant, the identification of "a boy" is unusual in Khoury-Ghata's poetry. In addition, although the poem depicts a nocturnal theme, the absence of negative structures gives the poem a certain weightlessness that is nonetheless counterbalanced by the last word, "pierres".

Another poem also addresses the theme of the child in nature, but in the context of maternal care:

Elle laisse l'enfant à la femme verte adossée à la forêt  
 qu'elle lui apprenne à traire les arbres femelles et boire leur lait  
 tête renversée en arrière  
 à s'étirer jusqu'à l'épiphanie pour grandir dans tous les sens  
 à se tenir dans l'orage sans mouiller son coeur ni casser ses cils (32)

The first two lines immediately evoke a song produced primarily by the alliteration of "l" in "elle laisse l'enfant," "elle lui," "les arbres femelles," and "leur lait." The alliteration of "f" and "v" in the first line and the approximate rhyme of "forêt" and "lait" contribute to its musicality. The feminine figure's gesture of leaving the child to "la femme verte," suggests the eternal link to and trust in nature as well as a passage from one generation to the next. Their singular exchange of the child gives way to the notion of sharing and caring on the part of the feminine collective portrayed as "les arbres femelles" – a rare occasion when trees are personified as female figures – that are rendered maternal by the evocation of their providing the child with milk. Their nurturing maternal gestures mitigate the violence implied by the image of the child with

“tête renversée.” In addition to the expression of “renversement” and the use of the negative construction “sans...ni” in the fourth line, the promotion of nocturnal values is progressively highlighted in subsequent verses that enumerate what the maternal figures will teach the child:

et comment se prosterner devant la nuit par respect pour son grand  
 âge  
 sans plier l'échine devant les ténèbres  
 sans humilier le jour suspendu derrière les portes  
 ni la fauvette nocturne capable d'annuler son concert au moindre  
 courant d'air (32)

The nocturnal-diurnal dichotomy is evoked with the former representing a sage to be respected whereas the latter is portrayed as a diminished force, vulnerable to humiliation. The recurrence of the negative construction “sans...ni” in these last lines evokes the cyclical movement of the nocturnal, which is finally linked to “la fauvette,” the warbler. The child is thus cautioned not to disturb the nocturnal songbird whose song – suggested in the last verse by the alternating alliteration and assonance in “capable d'annuler son concert au moindre courant d'air” – is liable to cease at the slightest breeze. In contrast with the aforementioned poem, both the negative and the nocturnal are represented in this poem's structure and themes, thus rendering it more ambivalent and compelling.

Both poems represent anomalies in as much as the portrayal of “a boy” and “female trees” is unusual in Khoury-Ghata's verse. Perhaps more significantly, references to both a miraculous event and an epiphany imply a satisfying culmination that is rarely evoked in the poet's oeuvre. Otherwise, we observe characteristics that are now

familiar to us: the oral and rhythmic drives of Kristeva's semiotic as well as the copulative and digestive reflexes of Durand's nocturnal order, because both poems celebrate the notion of a child "en pleine nature" where the vegetal and nocturnal coincide, and where a not quite human-produced liquid, saliva or milk, represents a vital source. And, the presence of "clochette" in one poem and "fauvette" in the other poem evokes the feminine voice. Taking into consideration the negative vision and obscure forces that Michael Bishop underscores in his study of contemporary women poets, we have observed throughout this examination the omnipresent nocturnal in Khoury-Ghata's poetry. Here, we confirm that her negative and nocturnal poetics, even in proximity to other poems of sorrow and despair, nonetheless remain capable of expressing an affirmation of life, incarnated by youth, and nurtured by the maternal.

#### Reconciling Differences and the Persistence of Binary Structures

The representation of physical contact between figures in the aforementioned two poems evokes the principal verbal themes of the nocturnal order, "relier" affiliated with synthetic structures, and "confrondre" affiliated with mystical structures. They signify two actions that govern Khoury-Ghata's quest for a relationship with the Other as well as the reconciliation of her dual identity. Using the framework of myth and language, we have examined how her poetic structure and themes represent the rapprochement of the following components: the heritage of two poetic traditions, two languages, two genres, two modes of expression, gender, and personal and mythical narratives. The dynamics of connection and fusion are also evident in her representation of autobiography, which

merges the personal and the collective.

We have observed that her poetry, which manifests the influence of both surrealist and magical realist notions, reflects the heritage of twentieth-century Francophone and Arabophone poets who, on the one hand, abandoned the tradition of rigid poetic forms to pursue freedom of structure and, on the other hand, re-appropriated the tradition of oral expression and ancient myths. Her poetry reveals correspondences with French writers, from Rabelais to Rimbaud to Char, the Francophone Lebanese poet Georges Schehadé, and Arabophone poets such as Khalil Gibran and Adonis.

Her writing demonstrates her attachment to both French and Arabic languages and her acute awareness of the distinction between them, which has produced experimentation that reveals the limits of synthesis. The unbridgeable gap between two languages has not prevented her from using French as a tool to “libaniser” the French text so that it adopts the shape of Lebanese villagers, moves with the gestures of fallen combatants, and speaks the wisdom of a provincial housewife. Her effort to merge two languages is reinforced by her dual production of poetry and novels, both of whose structures are marked by her fidelity to the narrative tradition and whose themes of loss and death overlap.

With regard to her portrayal of the human figure, Khoury-Ghata’s adherence to gender-based roles suggests an unapologetic essentialist position that nevertheless has to be viewed as a reflection and a critique of Lebanese society. Other Lebanese writers, notably the women writers of Khoury-Ghata’s generation, represent equally fierce critiques of gender relations and patriarchal domination in Lebanese society.



Nevertheless, the force of Khoury-Ghata's poetry renders the provincial Lebanese mother a compelling poetic figure. Her verse champions a distinctly feminine work ethic that underscores the values represented by the traditional domestic occupations of women. The female figure's collaborative efforts with terrestrial and celestial forces, as well as with the living and the dead, render the domestic sphere and, by extension, the universe more habitable, perhaps suggesting Khoury-Ghata's interpretation of what Jean-Claude Pinson refers to as making poetry more "habitante." Domestic tasks and poetry require similar skills and the same devotion, according to Khoury-Ghata, who derives satisfaction from both activities.

Nevertheless, the phenomena of domestic chores in her poetry represent neither the liberation of suppressed desires, nor an escape from hardship; rather, they transform the ordinary rural Lebanese woman's stoic and persistent efforts into an extraordinary labor of sacrifice that serves the collective and reconstructs a fractured world. This representation of the rural domestic heroine whose amazing feats defy spatial and temporal barriers not only provides ample evidence that the heritage of surrealism is thriving in contemporary women's literature, it also contributes to the consideration of a more global approach to the feminine in postmodern magical realism.

Khoury-Ghata's blurring of boundaries between the personal and collective, History and myth, demonstrates the flexibility of her bilingual and bicultural identity as well as the mythical structures that she adopts to represent both her story and History. Her affiliation with Lebanese and French cultures provides access to a vast source of mythical images and structures of Mediterranean origins, which she uses to convey her

vision of a fabulous world that resonates with the familiar and the exotic. While Khoury-Ghata's mythicization of the provincial Lebanese mother represents a contemporary localized adaptation of myth, the uniqueness of her representation perhaps lies in her use of verse rather than prose, which gives her poetic mission the aura of an ancient sacred practice in the form of an incantation that her prose narrative cannot express. The concentrated force of her verse simultaneously crystallizes the essence of her Lebanese Maronite roots and radiates the power of a more universal myth

As for Khoury-Ghata's representation of History, Marilyn Hacker suggests that her poetry emblemizes "toute la problématique d'une écriture entre-deux-langues rendue nécessaire par l'Histoire au majuscule."<sup>169</sup> My introduction suggests that Khoury-Ghata's poetry should be examined in the context of what Pinson describes as the contemporary poet's response to the melancholy of the black sun. Since her nocturnal poetics address the melancholy of personal loss wrought by family tragedy as well as that of collective loss caused by national, and even regional catastrophes, I would add here that Khoury-Ghata's poetry also arguably responds to what Kevin Carollo identifies in his essay, "Impossible Returns: The State of Contemporary Francophone Literary Production," as an "anxiety of space" provoked by national instability and contested identities.<sup>170</sup> Carollo suggests that Francophone ex-patriot writers such as Khoury-Ghata

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<sup>169</sup> Hacker, *Aujourd'hui Poème*.

<sup>170</sup> Kevin Carollo, "Impossible Returns: The State of Contemporary Francophone Literary Production," *Journal of Midwest Modern Language Association*, Fall, 39 (2) (2006): 114-32. Carollo refers to Khoury-Ghata's novel *La Maestra* as the representation of an inversion of "the predominant global migration pattern from rural periphery to urban center." (14).

address notions of hyphenated identities and anxiety of space.

In a similar vein, the title of Ken Seigneurie's collection of essays, Crisis and Memory, the Representation of Space in Modern Levantine Narrative,<sup>171</sup> highlights the significance that Lebanese writers accord space in the context of History. Although none of the scholars in his study address Khoury-Ghata's work, Seigneurie's proposition that Levantine literature represents a "nexus of memory and homeland" is evocative of Khoury-Ghata's poetic quest to restore Lebanon on "la page blanche." (27). When asked about the significance of Lebanon, and its war, in her writing, she replies, "C'était ma manière à moi de lui redonner vie, de le ressusciter" (Stout 309).

Certainly, Khoury-Ghata's vision of a rapprochement between two different languages and cultures manifests the tensions of a hyphenated identity and the search for a home in exile. Her portrait of the human figure, landscape, and language, particularly in a rural Lebanese context, reveals a powerful attachment to space, both real and imaginary. Her insistence on the figural representation of her maternal language as well as the dead suggests the extreme measures that she takes to re-appropriate space and re-figure absence. Her refusal to recognize the frontiers of fact and fiction, personal and collective, allows her to occupy a vast writing terrain, in which she is determined to be as inclusive as possible: "un mariage entre la prose et la poésie, entre l'arabe et le français, entre l'être humain et la nature, l'homme et l'arbre, l'être humain et l'arbre, marier les

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<sup>171</sup> Ken Seigneurie, ed., Crisis and Memory, the Representation of Space in Modern Levantine Narrative (Weisbaden: Riechert Verlag, 2003).

contraires.<sup>172,</sup>

The persistent evocation of oppositions in the oeuvre of Khoury-Ghata examined in the context of binary structures conceived by Kristeva and Durand, as well as Brunel and other critics, invites the interrogation of the durability of bipolarity as a framework for creative discourse. In spite of its implied tension, perhaps bipolarity offers a reassuring paradigm in a world of chaos. As the pivotal figure, Khoury-Ghata's "médiatrice" suggests that redemption is found in an axis of words that engenders a collective experience of reconciliation and initiation.

Elle dit:

Les mots horizontaux nous réconcilient avec la plaine  
les verticaux nous initient à l'arbre qui marche sur le bord du ravin  
pour narguer le vide et concurrencer la fuite du temps (Les obscurcis 33)

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<sup>172</sup> Personal interview.

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