

Hyper-Despotism of the Bullet: Post-Bardo Tunisia and its (Unforgiving) Memorial Communiqué

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“Je n’attends pas la mort
La mort l’imaginaire
J’attends le cri et la colère
De cent mille oiseaux de mon peuple traqué
De cent mille oiseaux
De cent mille frères d’amour garottés”
(Ghachem, *Cent Mille Oiseaux*)¹

“Muse, let the memories spill through me.”
(Virgil, *Aeneid*)²

L’Avenue Bourguiba, Tunis, the 25th of March, 2015: I find myself strolling down the tree-lined parade, deep in conversation with my friend Mœz Majed, one of the country’s finest writers and editor of the bestselling *Opinions* magazine.³ It has been a long and troubled exchange, so much so we barely realise we are now walking past the building that houses Tunisia’s Ministry of the Interior, its *Dakhleyya*, which also served as a torture outfit meant to silence political dissidents during the ben Ali years, prior to 2011. This very spot, Mœz points out, is where he stood three years ago, as tens of thousands of Tunisians from all walks of life gathered in front of the dreaded building with a single message for the incumbent President: *Dégagée! Irhal! Leave!*⁴ This afternoon, the *Dakhleyya* is festooned with hundreds of Tunisian flags, in celebration of the country’s national day (the 20th of March), which also commemorates the anniversary of Tunisia’s independence from France. Fluttering in an unruffled bliss, the tiny flags make for a bizarre contrast with the

heavy security outfit that, as we draw closer, we realise encircles the building. It becomes almost impossible to sit down for a *kahoua* anywhere around without endless coils of barbed wire hampering one's line of sight. I try to snap a picture of the festooned building, but an armed officer rushes over and stops me: *il est interdit, monsieur*.

I am here as a guest of *Tounes wal Kitab* (Tunisia and the Book), an association established in 2012, a year after the Jasmine uprisings, to promote writing and reading culture in Tunisia, across all genres.⁵ Together with poets from Belgium, Morocco, Tunisia and France, I have been invited to read my poetry at the third edition of *Poètes en Fête*, an annual soirée of poetry recitals held at the Ennejma Ezzahra, Baron Rodolphe d'Erlanger's stunning neo-Andalusi palace at Sidi Bou Saïd. This is a busy week for Tunisia. Besides *Poètes en Fête*, the country is also hosting, amongst other events, the World Social Forum, the *Foire Internationale du Livre de Tunis* (the Tunis International Book Fair), the Artists for Palestine initiative, and a massive anti-terrorism march which French President François Hollande is also attending. Barely a week has passed since the carnage at Tunis' Bardo National Museum, one of the deadliest jihadist attacks in the country's independent history, which claimed the lives of twenty-two people and dealt a significant blow to the country's fledgling political and economic morale.⁶

Despite the widespread fears triggered by the attacks, artists, writers, intellectuals and non-governmental organisations from across the world have flocked to the Tunisian capital, in evident defiance of the jihadist threat. At the *Café l'Univers*, something of a communist, intellectual and artiste hangout right on the Avenue, patrons are discussing the Bardo events over a late afternoon aperitif. In the distance, closer to the kasbah, urban hip-hop artist Zied Nigro can be heard singing his popular *Douza Douza* as locals and tourists alike mill around the market stalls. Even as people here try to get on with their lives, the atmosphere behind the national show of unity remains tense – a stifled inkling that seems to hold this fledgling, post-dictatorial polity in its nervous thrall. But unlike the 2011 euphoria, the epicentre of this strange historical intimation, this as yet unrecognisable *angst* that is slowly but surely convening, does not stem from the historic Avenue, nor from its adjacent streets of national consensus – their bookshelves rife, of late, with tales of *la révolution confisquée* and *la révolution kidnappée*.⁷ This new beast has slouched instead towards

a historic Husseinid-era building a few kilometres outside the centre of Tunis, on the outskirts of the city, in the suburbs of a national imaginary that Tunis was beginning to don with a certain pride. And its hoof-prints are unforgiving.

*An Exhibit, A Souvenir*⁸

Tunisia boasts one of the most distinct political formations along the south-eastern Mediterranean littoral. Mass communication media outlets across Europe and the United States keep doling out sound-bites and write-ups updating their audiences and viewerships on the state of play of secularism and secularist politics in Tunisia, especially in the wake of the country's recent parliamentary elections.⁹ As Mœz points out to me, however, such terminology does not carry much clout over here – or, indeed, much direct pertinence at all to the country's far more complex political configuration. In reality, numerous liberal, social-democrat and reform-minded groups in the city and further afield are feeling the need to speak again today, with renewed vigour and enthusiasm, of what is referred to in Tunis as *pensée destourienne*, or constitutional thought. Particularly in the wake of the parliamentary plurality of the *Nidaa Tounes* party in October of 2014, this mode of political thought, urged on by its ethos of social reform and reform of the body-politic, has been increasingly touted as the country's most feasible way forward. In President Béji Caïd Essebsi's elderly but able hands, and after the flagrant social injustices, disparities, institutional turbulence and a flattened educational system left behind by ben Ali, Tunisia is trying to strengthen, once more, the destourian path espoused during the Cold War years by the country's first president, Habib Bourguiba. Despite the despotism his rule has been harshly criticised for, Bourguiba's presidency had strived to bring about – and especially so through a significant programme of social reform – a national and economic modernity adequate to Tunisia's post-independence needs.

Not least because of Essebsi's inspiration from *bourguibisme* as a political heritage, this broad alliance of liberal, reformist, left-wing, Islamic-reformist, centrist and other positions was able to gradually regain popular support over the past two years.¹⁰ This “unprecedented” coming-together, to use Nicolas Beau's and Dominique Lagarde's adjective was due, in part, also to the country's long political memory: one that predates

its independence to trace auspicious scholarly and activist origins in Tunisia's reformist movement of the second part of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. The succession of luminaries that shaped the movement included reformers and intellectuals such as Abdelaziz Thâalbi, Tahar Ben Achour, who worked to reform religious thought by proposing, as Majed has argued, "intentionalist" as opposed to literalist (or "rigoriste") approaches to the sacred texts, Tahar Haddad, who initiated the discourse of Muslim women's emancipation in Tunisia, and numerous others.¹¹ As this emancipatory reformism gradually came to be absorbed within the country's structures of political engagement, including numerous political parties, the outcome was an inclusive coming together of a more liberal Islamic thought with European Enlightenment values – a composite identification that, as Tunisia's recent political history has shown, has also operated in tandem with left-wing and social-democrat beliefs. This was, in other words, a fluid politics that understands Islamic identity as *in itself* a means of attaining political modernity, economic and social reform and emancipation, without, however, acceding to the restrictive demands of an entrenched Islamist politics.

Pensée destourienne has therefore opened up a political context wherein the reform of Islamic thought would, in Majed's words at his recent seminar in Malta, "constitute the key to a debate about Tunisia's national modernity that does not, however, reject the country's Arabo-Muslim sphere of identification. On the contrary: it takes place right *within it*, rather than in spite of it." (Majed 2015, my translation) This, in itself, is seen by many as the salient intellectual and social-political achievement of an otherwise broad-ranging destourian reformism. But such political headway in the Arab world, Mœz warns me as we walk down the *Avenue*, does not come without its own obscure disclaimers: Tunisia's recent revival of its destourian trajectory has raised the ire of several Arab regimes, but especially those who have accommodated Salafist and Wahhabist elements within their states in tandem with an unbridled hyper-capitalist outlook (Ibid.). The message to their own people of these dictatorial formations, who continue to profit today from political division, localised oppression and subservience to neo-liberalist agendas, Moëz insists, is loud, clear, and simple. It is a message of fear, a message for those who dare dream of ridding themselves of their historic masters, rulers, kings and pharaohs, and to demand a political freedom without pre-conditions: such an extent of popular ambition is morally condemnable, and by this same virtue,

punishable. Mohamed Kasmi reaffirms, in fact, Guido Steinberg's early assessment of the uprisings, namely, that for the Gulf States these popular ambitions "constitute a menace. They are afraid the same condition could be forged in their own houses" (Kasmi 126). Their implicit message to the world's other economic powers is that in the Arab context, only a dictatorial set-up can offer the right transnational and cross-border business arrangements and conditions. Within this macro-regional *status quo*, post-*Nahda* Tunisia had become the misfit – the "Tunisian exception", as Beau, Lagarde and Majed have termed it (2014). The exception will therefore need to be brought to its knees.¹² The ensuing terror had to be such that it etched the perils of "being different" in the minds of Tunisians in an irrevocable manner, regardless of their nuanced persuasions – its reach had to correspond, that is, to the diversified and popular influence of the destourian revival itself. *Ergo*, the Bardo.

This political trajectory specific to Tunisia, one that, historically, has cut transversally across both popular consciousness and intellectual debate, is key to an understanding of why the site targeted for the inscription of national trauma had to be, precisely, the Bardo National Museum.¹³ Converted into the Museum of National Antiquities in 1885, the history of this nineteenth-century Husseinid architectural masterpiece coincides in many ways with the rise and flourishing of Tunisian social-political reformism. Its staggeringly diverse collection, as well as the humanist lineage of its sourcing and acquisition, offers a parallel cultural plane to the multi-positional history and present configuration of *pensée destourienne* itself: from Phoenician and Roman mosaics to Moorish architecture and stucco decors, from sculptures salvaged from Hippopolis and Carthage to the glazed ceramic tiles of Qallaline, from departments focused on prehistory, the Punic era, Numidian civilisation, the underwater treasures of Mahdia, late antiquity and the Islamic Golden Age, to the iconic (and unique) mosaic that portrays Virgil composing the *Aeneid*, flanked by the muses of poetry and drama.¹⁴ In terms of both its historic collection and the recently-renovated space that houses it, therefore, the Bardo functions as a pulse to the country's own aspiring historical consciousness: the museum is a protean *limen*, a contingent space wherein the remains of Tunisia's intriguing antiquity, its imprints and legacies of successive historical subjection under both Muslim, European and other colonial forces, encounter and motivate the country's fledgling but determined effort to attain its discursive, political and social self-affirmation.

The March 18th shootings affected this poise in a profound way. As one walks into a now-sombre *Salle de Carthage* and its adjacent rooms, having first admired the mosaics on the lower floors, the pock-marks and bullet holes begin to appear (see Figures 1 and 2). They are everywhere visible, in walls, shattered vitrines and even inside a wooden *ginnarija* (balcony). They do not approach softly – unsummoned and unexpected, they come at the visitor with the unsparing force of an epistemic violence, going straight for the country’s jugular: upon encountering them one immediately senses they have succeeded in reaching through to what Eva Hoffman would term the community’s post-despotic “deep material of the self”, or, to use Jean Laplanche’s phrase, the polity’s “*intimior intimo meo*” (Hoffman 40; Laplanche 67). In other words, they threaten to touch that which is somewhat more inward to the national imaginary than its own self-negotiated inwardness – a dark night of the socius that, judging simply by the eerie silence that gripped the national museum upon its re-opening to the public, had ramified intself into the capillary psychic structures of the Tunisian population (*Ibid.*). In murdering the museum visitors, the country’s guests, the jihadist bullets dealt the first significant blow to the its burgeoning narrative of economic hope after 2011. But the museum’s new exhibits themselves – the bullet-holes – have also inscribed what is perhaps an even more insidious and unforgiving semantic shift. The Bardo could no longer simply register itself as the animate nexus of transition from the delusions of dictatorial rule and Islamist government into a more expansive and politically diversified socio-cultural arrangement. It now had to metaphorise, to adopt within its noumenal matter, a rather unexpected volta: from the quasi-uncathed promise of a neo-destourian modernity that was almost within reach, into the post-traumatic labour of having to preserve, against the worst possible odds, the country’s struggling continuum of political and social-cultural self-worth.¹⁵

By virtue of this agitatory gesture, the bullet-mark and the fractured vitrine not only seek to generate an altered state (*double entendre* intended) from “hope” to “fear”, but they themselves undergo a reverse semantic transition: they now acquire a certain status as novel national, perhaps even national-cultural, exhibits: unasked for, these obscure monads have now come to nestle in the recesses of a national imaginary in its critical age, its democratic infancy. In such a context, their presence cannot but demand a certain hermeneutics of the recent past, one that Paul Ricoeur had identified as that of the *souvenir*, or “the memory [of crisis] one has before



Figure 1



Figure 2

the mind [...]” (Ricoeur 391). The new object of national meditation, its *souvenir*, is a critical one in this context, in the sense that Tunisia’s singular constitutional accomplishments after the 2011 uprisings are patently unlike that of any other post-revolutionary Arab state. As such, the wound ensuing from Bardo, its *souvenir*, can only be recognised, in Heidegger’s phrase, as *je mein eigenes*, as “something given to you uniquely to bear and to suffer” (Jameson 21). Bullet, fracture, *souvenir*: as soon as it lodges itself firmly in the imaginary, the impact of the traumatic object is, almost inevitably, two-pronged: on the one hand, it triggers an ontological schema of memorial crisis. But by this same virtue, of its inducement of an ontological crisis precipitated by recall, the *souvenir* is also rendered incitative, in the sense that it compels its bearer to wean oneself toward an inevitable itinerary of *survivre*: one that may, perhaps, be understood as a crisis-informed attunement to “the problematical nature of the past’s manner of persevering in the present”, as invoked by Ricoeur (391).

In referencing the past’s “manner of persevering” among its community of inheritors, I am not speaking here of any commemorative approach, “lest we forget” discourse, or equivalent stances – ones that have been eminently disputed in the field of memory studies in general.¹⁶ Neither do I intend, by emphasizing this discursive trajectory, to under-reference the economic nightmare that has been visited upon Tunisia in the wake of the Bardo and even worse, the June 26th massacre at Sousse. Crippling the country in this manner was, most evidently, the intention of the real aggressors, those maneuvering behind the scenes. But this terrifying fallout impels the perseverance of the past as a much more strenuous labour than the 2011 Jasmine uprisings themselves required, as they removed ben Ali to unearth the politics of social progress he had buried alive. Unlike the despotic regime itself, the *souvenir*, the terror-object, *cannot* itself be ousted, or even exorcised. It may, as such, be approached as what one may call a “hyper-despotic” corpus, a new and terrifying inscription that returns to re-occupy the delicate physiological spaces between the advent of terror and its widespread socio-psychic *longue durée*. In this rarefied capacity, the *souvenir* acts as an indispensable causal nexus: it forges the urgency of *survivre* as the salient prerogative, the contingent *imperative*, of a post-despotic politics. This, in itself, highlights the latter’s onus – its need to deliver on its ethical mandate – an inestimable one.

Facing the Infant Deity

In its hyper-despotic presencing, as a remnant-object of terror that is impossible to exorcise, the *souvenir* acts, first and foremost, to perpetuate the eidetic faculty: to actualise, that is, those heightened moments of visual recall of an event that trigger what Ricoeur has invoked as *mnēmē*, or “the popping into mind of a [specific] memory” (Ricoeur 4). In this capacity, the *souvenir* can also forge a palpable nexus between the event’s singular semantic – its strategic violence – and the pragmatic path of anamnestic labour (*anamnēsis*), the painstaking work of “memory as an object of a search” – the quest towards the recovery of an imperiled political future (4). After Bardo, this anamnestic labour has now been largely foisted upon those forces working towards a destourian renewal in Tunisia: in this sense, the carnage at the national museum has plunged the country’s progressive imaginary willy-nilly into a politics of the “after the blow”, or the temporality of the *après-coup*, as Jean Laplanche would call it (Laplanche 260-65).

Figure 3



One could, literally, almost *touch* this nervous liminal condition, the traumatised body-politic, after the Bardo re-opened for visitors. But the tension inside one of the rooms that were strewn with the dead and the dying after the attack was almost unbearable: the so-called *Salle de la Cuirasse Campanienne* (The Campanian Breastplate Room), a small chamber right behind the museum’s famed *Salle de Carthage*. Now full of cracked and fractured vitrines, the chamber houses, amongst other exhibits, an important bronze statuette of the infant Bacchus wielding the thyrsus and the rhyton, a second-century AD sculpture recovered from Béja (Figure 3).

The entire Bardo collection could not, perhaps, have afforded us a more apt metaphor for the country's buoyant political mood subsequent to the 2014 parliamentary elections than its very own locally-retrieved Bacchus. The statuette portrays an infant deity pregnant with revelatory desires, its facial expression – a somewhat cautious one – summoning its interlocutor to come forward and help oneself from the rhyton of a fledgling, but promising, joy. The Bacchus vitrine provided a poignant semantic node: here is where a post-Jasmine politics of destourian promise – of an invitation of the diverse and the different to inter-participate outside the circuit of *rigorisme* – was replenished by what one could term, following Graham Harman, an “object-oriented” metaphysics (Harman 96). Harman's speculative thought is important because through its discursive lens, the infant Bacchus will not be easily relegated to a purely symbolic or analogic status. On the contrary, the object of history, its surviving *thing*, comes to be understood as embodying an intrinsic or noumenal *communiqué*, “something deeper than its transient, shifting façade” (148). Alphonse Lingis, a powerful influence on Harman, had spoken of the thing's ‘interior motor schema’, one that motivates the “face” that a thing projects unto the empirical world (15). “To recognize the other as other”, Lingis writes in his contemplation of the labour inherent to the thing, “is to sense the imperative weighing on his or her thought. It is to sense its imperative force [...]” (15).¹⁷ And, building on Lingis' thought, Harman reaffirms that “To see the other as other [...] is to stand before an actual imperative, a sincere finality in the world that cannot be identical with the history that gave birth to it” (15). The other, Harman observes, is “an autonomous commander, by virtue of the task he confronts us with” (18). Such a task can be perceived as indispensable, insofar as it partakes of the historical object's “notional determination” itself, as Slavoj Žižek would call it, or in Jacques Lacan's terms, its *trait unaire* (Žižek viii-xi).

How can one, however, propose to locate the intrinsic and, often enough, elusive make-up of the task, or of the memory-object's “unary” determination (Žižek x)? I circled around the infant Bacchus for a very long time. The young museum guide, himself a survivor of the attack, ushered me around the adjacent spaces, pointing out to me the exact locations of the victims' last moments: “here is where the Belgian woman fell [...] another man died right here [...]”. When I finally faced the deity, I could not help thinking that, underneath the “enigmatic” *communiqué* of that face turned toward me, the intrinsic task, the noumenal “imperative weighing on its

thought”, could not but be overcast by its recent, melancholy bequeathal (Laplanche 258-260). Upon looking closely at my photograph of the Bacchus, one will notice that two impacts, and not one, have in fact been sustained. The fracture caused by the bullet on the glass pane is the most visible one. But right behind it, if one looks just above the bullet’s spherical burst, one will also observe another, smaller trauma, a white-coloured abrasion or “superficial wound” to the Bacchus’ right thigh, caused by the same bullet. If one follows on from Harman’s and Lingis’ purview, that liminal nano-second, that time differential in between the penetration of the vitrine and the impact to the thigh, becomes a productive one in the pursuit of the imperative or task intrinsic to the (historical) object. For *time* itself, Harman argues in a central essay of his, emanates from the intentional object, and as such can be understood as arising from the inherent tension perceptible in-between “an intentional object and its accidents [...]” Harman 165). The “emanation of accidents from an intentional object”, “the difference between objects and accidents”, Harman points out, “gives us time” (161-163).

To choose to follow the signs that have appeared at the Bardo is to recognise this new-found tension they invoke in relation to the historical objects that have sustained their impact: one that will need to be apprehended both as a memorial cicatrice *and* as an anxiety of post-traumatic progress. In this embattled climate, the ensuing tension between the historical object and its received accidents comes to be read as a dialectical one, one whose enigmatic message unfolds, in our case, in-between the bursting of the vitrine and the bruising of the infant Bacchus. The first impact, in this sense, invokes the psychic condition outlined by Giorgio Agamben in an excursus on Hegel and the subjectivity of crisis, wherein he emphasises Hegel’s own conception of “pure culture” as a “consciousness of laceration” (“la coscienza della lacerazione”) (Agamben 40, my translation). Following Agamben’s thought, and in the wake of the terror, “The only way [the subject] has to possess itself is in fact that of taking upon itself, integrally, the state of contradiction and, negating itself, [finding] itself again in the lap of extreme laceration” (42, my translation). Agamben’s insight here is crucial. The state of contradiction facing this fledgling democracy, jeopardised by both internal religious rigorism and external despotic constituencies, will need to be embraced as a “consciousness of laceration” (40): one that, exactly like the initial burst in the Bacchus vitrine, does not expire right there, but becomes conducive to – indeed, spurs ahead, a deeper horizon of aspiration.

Herein lies the dialectical character of the Bardo injury: the initial laceration necessarily leads on to its ancillary, but nevertheless crucial, impact. Just as the Bacchus' thigh feels the heat of the bruise, so does the national imaginary come to be compelled into a new political vigilance, into the urgency of effecting the transition from Agamben's consciousness of laceration into what Benita Parry has termed "the consciousness of historical continuity", or "the continuity of historical consciousness" (Parry 184, 185). The object-accident tensions of the Bardo, their *time*, calls for a rapid taking-into-account of this urgent traversation. The initial bullet-mark, the *souvenir*, becomes, henceforth, the matrix of a pressing contingency, the approaching task of a national imaginary now operating in-between the fate of laceration and the imperative of continuity. The jihadist bullet at the Bardo is not relatable, for instance, to Julien Sorel's first bullet fired at Madame de Rênal inside the church of Verrières, in Stendhal's novel *Le Rouge et le Noir*. Stendhal's first bullet was destined to oblivion or immateriality, as Umberto Eco has shown, or perhaps towards piquing his readers' avid curiosity (Eco 83-85). But the Bardo bullet wanted its journey to be shadowed by all: in its double-step trajectory from vitrine to object, it has lumped the infant deity with an unprecedented task. One can, perhaps, begin to outline the contours of this task, one can begin to gauge its delicate *raison d'être*, in the question chillingly posited by Laplanche in this manner: "What does the dead person want? What does he want of me? What did he want to say to me?" (Laplanche 254-255, my italics).

To take the dead person's injunction seriously implies, therefore, a certain being-receptive to the hyper-despotism of the bullet: not only, this time round, as an agent of laceration, but *also* as an invitation to service the task's relentless deciphering. As Laplanche has shown in his thought on the *après-coup*, this question resists a pure hermeneutics of the past, precisely because it is its enigmatic claim that will continue to propel the agency of the unjustly deceased to the forefront of historical awareness. The task that predicates the question itself thus beckons to us from the future, since it also "contains rather in an immanent fashion something that comes before [...] the past already has something deposited in it that demands to be deciphered, which is the message of the other person" (Laplanche 254-255).¹⁸ In the wake of the Bardo, that past and that *communiqué* have now become immanent to the wounded Bacchus, to its unfathomably future-oriented gaze. The bullet-mark has replenished the *latency* of that gaze; it has complicated the manner in which, to quote Žižek again, the

statue now “contracts actuality to possibility, in the precise Platonic sense in which the notion (idea) of a thing always has a deontological dimension to it, designating what the thing should become in order to be fully what it is” (Žižek xi). In all hope, this deontological gaze will strengthen Essebsi’s and his colleagues’ resolve to combat fear through, rather than in spite of, the resources and good will of their *assemblée pluraliste* itself (See Beau and Lagarde 41).

Who, therefore, Will Dare Forgetfulness?

The dialectic of this political desire, of the being-caught in between the irrevocability of a memorial cicatrice and the impatience of an expectant body-politic, is captured in subtle terms in Majed’s own creative output, particularly his long meditation titled *Chants de l’autre rive*, a *poème* that has established itself as a major literary *oeuvre* of post-ben-Ali Tunisia (2013). In turns proleptic and anxious, audacious and guarded, Majed’s poetic homage to a Tunisia in the whirlwind of political change allegorises the newly-emergent polity as “a dream of sailors embattled by fear” (Majed 4: 7). The poem weaves a metaphoric schema that can be read alongside the political choices faced by post-2011 Tunisia. It suggests an ambivalent and enigmatic scenario, wherein the *hiatus* that opened up after ben Ali’s demise may be perceived as both an enabling moment, a steep learning curve, and a veritable trans-Mediterranean *periplous*. These new possibilities will, however, be relentlessly threatened by reactionary forces and paralytic political developments. Majed writes:

“Ah ! What pain, beyond imagining!
What impenetrable silences!
What great expectations, impervious to oblivion!

Ah ! What have you seized from the splendid waves of your time? [...]

O first rains after summer!
Was it nothing, therefore, but clay,
This skin I’d thought mine?

O pepper and oracles, raining on a people in labour!
All-out wrath,

And the frightening panic.
In the old days, the fear ... tomorrow, childhood. [...]

Was it a failure
To hasten the fall of a lifeless tree trunk?

Today, many others
Again will agree to stupor and death.
They will march, indifferent to the rough tyranny,
And at nightfall
They'll go back to their homes, duty complete.

Pride ...
Flame of pure Barus camphor.
Flavour of empires consumed by great release.

O Dido ! My mother, my sister, my child!
I'd imagine you cried, seeing us dying. [...]

Who, therefore, will dare forgetfulness?

Who, therefore, could give me the grace
To drink the silence of an eternity in alabaster?"

(Majed 1-4, my translation)

Majed's poem here alternates between hope and doubt: the hopes, perhaps, of post-regime euphoria and the burgeoning doubts in the country's prospective cultivation of an adequate *politique destourienne*, which it believes in, to its desired fruition. This is a tension that the poem takes to the verge of an aporetic delimitation: Majed's work is haunted – and haunts – the discursive pathways of national memory as these began to morph in the wake of Tunisia's new political circumstances, ones that kept evolving at breathtaking speed after 2011: from the election of the Islamist *Nahda* party in October of that year, to the country's constitutional debacle, to the promising parliamentary plurality of Essebsi's *Nidaa Tounes* in December 2014, to the Bardo and Sousse. This train of events did not only herald a new order of parliamentary representation within Tunisia. It also wound its way outside of its borders, to the power-wielding corridors of the watching Arab regimes, to find its terrifying *denouement* in the chambers

of the Bardo. Hence the anxiously prophetic tenor in Majed's writing. On the one hand, this poem is profoundly aware of its allegiance to a certain "order of imitation" of history, an order that is inexorably haunted, as Ricoeur indicates, by the "object-side" of memory itself: "what is there to say", Ricoeur demands, "of the enigma of an image, of an *eikōn* [...] that offers itself as the present of an absent thing stamped with the seal of the anterior?" (Ricoeur xvi).

Ricoeur's enigma of the *eikōn*, of the object of one's interrogation that is retained before the mind, places Majed's text within the dialectic of memory and history as an irreducible quandary: one wherein "the representation of the past is found to be exposed to the dangers of forgetting, but is also entrusted to its protection" (Ricoeur xvii). "Was it a failure | To hasten the fall of a lifeless tree trunk?", the poem ruminates, in a possible veiled reference to the unforeseen speed with which the Tunisian dictator was ousted (Majed 3: 3-4, my translation). But the poem provokes further questions in this respect. "Ah! What have you seized from the splendid waves of your time?" (1: 13, my translation), "Who, therefore, will dare forgetfulness? | Who, therefore, could give me the grace | To drink the silence of an eternity in alabaster?" (4: 8-10, my translation). These questions invoke a crucial vector of the Ricoeurian economy of recall, namely what he refers to, following Plato's *Sophist*, as *phantasma* or "fantastic art", a mode of eidetic access based on an imagined and projected "simulacrum or appearance [...]" (Ricoeur 11). In this sense, Majed's questions steer the post-uprising poem towards the realm of the speculative, the confrontation of an unmapped political trajectory and its uncharted waters that opened up after a quarter of a century during which the praxis of cultural amnesia had gradually consolidated itself. In relation to this amnesic time, Majed's interrogatory schema places its mechanisms at the service of the *revenant*, of the *phantasma*. The poem is, in its own being as object and as aesthetic, one forceful upshot of a long acultural causality (ben Ali's twenty-four-year-long dictatorship) that has served to foment in its wake a specific phenomenon, of which the poem itself partakes: what Andreas Huyssen would otherwise term the "hypertrophy of memory" in present-day Tunisian writing (Huyssen 3).

On the other hand, the poem is also a cautiously faithful one, a meta-political meditation that readily connects to what Ricoeur would invoke as the tradition of *tekhne eikastike*, or "the art of likeness-making" or of a "faithful and proportionate resemblance" to historical precedent (Ricoeur

11). Hence, for instance, its allusion to Dido, the Phoenician princess and founder of ancient Carthage. The poem's invocation here suggests a strategic sense of allegiance to the country's "fabled" past – an allegiance, however, that seeks to extract its salient historical signifier (Dido) from the latter's mythic invocations and summoning it instead as a cross-temporal witness to the country's current *rite de passage*: "O Dido! My mother, my sister, my child! I'd imagine you cried, seeing us dying" (Majed 3: 13, my translation). There is, in these verses, a proleptic sensitivity to the price in blood that a post-regime Tunisia would also have to pay and which, besides the revolution's 357 *shuhada*, included the deaths not only of Mohammad Bouazizi, but also of politicians and activists like Mohamed Brahmi, Choukri Belaïd and Lutfi Nagdh, as well as the Bardo and the Sousse victims.¹⁹ In this sense, the poem itself concurs with the stance of the infant Bacchus: the rhyton of the political future, the promise of "an eternity in alabaster", cannot but be wielded with a sullen and cautious gaze, a manner commensurate to the painful bequeathal of a damaged consciousness (Majed 4: 10).

"Ah! What pain, beyond imagining! | What impenetrable silences!" (1: 10-11, my translation). Deep within the poem's veiled historical undertones, one can sense the onus of a certain *verisme*, of the quest for a politics of sincerity in the representation of the post-despotic condition that gave occasion to the *poème* itself. This *verisme* can only be obtained, however, if the hermeneutic of history is carried out in tandem with a "mnemonics of crisis", with those *revenant* schemas of recall that both emanate from and return to haunt the laying out of historical representation.²⁰ In this rarefied sense, both *tekhne eikastike* and *phantasma* interact on the interior of that historical nexus which, in the last instance, determines the task of the poem itself. "[W]hat history is concerned with", Ricoeur had argued, paraphrasing one of the *Annales* school's central concerns, "is not only the living of the past, behind today's dead, but the actor of history gone by, once one undertakes to 'take the actors themselves seriously'" (384).²¹ True to this ethic, the poem's "mnemonics of crisis" is implicitly premising on Walter Benjamin's own insight, namely, that "the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (Benjamin 257).²² From Benjamin to Ricoeur, from Laplanche to Majed, the tenor discloses the same underlying ethos, and its accompanying *angst*. "What does the dead person want? What does he want of me? What did he want to say to me?" (Laplanche 254-255).

It is with their mantric gestures towards this question that the poem's "impenetrable silences" invite, perhaps even demand, by virtue of their reticence, the forging of a certain bond. Like the tiny *Salle de la Cuirasse Campanienne*, the ethical space opened up by this question *must* be recognised as a mere preamble, as an ante-chamber to that "absent thing stamped with the seal of the anterior" identified by Ricoeur (xvi). The question must, for the sake of its own survival, be received as "the distinctive feature of memory, namely, the anteriority of 'marks', *sēmeía*, in which the affections of the body and the soul to which memory is attached are signified" (Ricoeur 12).²³ In this role, it can then both predate and suffuse the decision on any future political action. Ricoeur's choice of the term "seal" here is by no means haphazard: its unique bond, the endowing of the question with the status of the *sēmēion* constitutes, perhaps, the supreme affirmation that post-Jasmine Tunisia will have received from the Bardo. As the demised actor of the past is allowed into those structures of political memory that remain intimate to the country's present-day socius with its diversified political desires, Tunisia's destourian promise, its "flame of pure Barus camphor" (Majed 1: 1), will own once more what it takes to survive.



- 1 Moncef Ghachem, *Cent Mille Oiseaux (Extrait)* in *Poètes en Fête – 3 ème Edition* (Tunis: Tounes wal Kitab, 2015), 58-67.
- 2 Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. by Frederick Ahl (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Book 1, verse 9.
- 3 In these three introductory paragraphs I am using parts of my feature article for *The Sunday Times* newspaper (Sunday, April 26 2015), titled ‘Modernity and the Museum: after Bardo’, and following on from my earlier first-person-account features on my literary-performance forays at Leipzig (2009), Ubud (2011) and others. My latest feature article gives an account of my experience in Tunisia in the immediate aftermath of the Bardo attacks. Available Online: <<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20150426/arts-entertainment/modernity-and-the-museum-after-bardo.565790>> For more information on *Opinions* magazine see the *Opinions* Facebook portal at: <<https://www.facebook.com/Opinions.magazine>> [accessed August 6 2015]
- 4 Timothy Brennan invokes this same, crucial moment of the Tunisian revolt in his excellent essay ‘Letters from Tunisia – Darwish and the Palestinian State of Mind’, in ‘Postcolonial Springs’, *Countertext 1.1* Special Issue April 2015 (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 20-37.
- 5 For more information see the Tounes wal Kitab Facebook portal at: <<https://www.facebook.com/TounesWalKitab>> [accessed July 1 2015]. See also *Poètes en Fête. Troisième Edition* (Tunis: Tounes wal Kitab, 2015).
- 6 The attack on the Bardo National Museum occurred on the 18th of March 2015. The death-toll statistic is based on the *In Memoriam* plaque placed by the Bardo National Museum authorities at the Museum entrance subsequent to the tragic events. The devastating June attack in Sousse was, of course, yet to happen.
- 7 These are the respective titles of two authoritative and insightful analyses of post-2011 Tunisia: Pierre Puchot’s *La Révolution Confisquée* (Actes Sud: Sindbad, 2012) and Mustapha Kraïem’s *La Révolution Kidnappée* (Tunis: Fondation Farhat Hached, 2014).
- 8 I am indebted to Moëz Majed for the factual and historiographic information presented in this section, and based on Majed’s incisive seminar at the

- University of Malta titled “Révolution du Jasmin: Printemps arabe ou juste une exception Tunisienne?” (Msida: University of Malta, August 25 2015).
- 9 For a detailed and informative report on Tunisia’s latest parliamentary elections, held on the 26th of October 2014, see the report of the joint observation mission to the Tunisian parliamentary elections of the Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD) and the International Institute for Peace, Justice and Human Rights (IIPJHR). Online Available: <http://www.gnr.net/GNRD%20%26%20IIPJHR%20JOINT%20MISSION%20TO%20TUNISIAN%20PARLIAMENTARY%20ELECTIONS%202014%20REPOR.pdf> [Accessed September 20 2015].
 - 10 See, in particular, Nicolas Beau’s and Dominique Lagarde’s *L’Exception Tunisienne – Chronique d’une transition démocratique mouvementée* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014: 41-56, 41, and Mohamed Salah Kasmi’s *Tunisie. L’Islam Locale face à l’Islam importé* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2014): 27-46, 57-61.
 - 11 Kasmi also singles out, amongst the major exponents of Tunisia’s modernist reformism, Kheireddine Pasha, Ibn Abi Dhiaf, Mohamed Snoussi, and Salem Bouhajib (p. 125). Early twentieth-century Tunisia also saw the rise of syndicalism and the establishment of trade unions, with conspicuous pioneers in the sector being Mohamed Ali El Hammi (founder of CGTT, 1925) and Farhat Hached (founder of UGTT, 1944-46).
 - 12 While my conversations with Moëz Majed, as well as his lecture ‘Révolution du Jasmin: Printemps arabe ou juste une exception Tunisienne?’ have been crucial towards honing various political conclusions, it is indeed impossible to attribute the views presented in this section’s first paragraphs to any single political analyst or scholar. Chapter VII of Mohamed Salah Kasmi’s *Tunisie. L’Islam locale face à l’Islam importé* broaches precisely the subject of an “imported Islam” of Wahhabist inspiration into Tunisia and its financing by privately-owned Saudi funds. Adam Hanieh’s book *Lineages of Revolt* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013) sheds an authoritative light on the Gulf states and neoliberalist dynamics with a concern for the broader Middle East. Samir Amghar has an incredibly detailed and comprehensive study of present-day Salafist politics and its numerous denominations, alliances and associations in his authoritative *Le Salafisme d’Aujourd’hui – Mouvements sectaires en Occident* (Paris: Michalon Éditions, 2011). In its informed analysis, Amghar’s study exposes the severe shortcomings of those who would speak of Islamist politics without alluding to the latter’s multiple and differentiated identifications. The interviews with Abdelmajid Charfi in *Révolution, Modernité, Islam* (Tunis: Sud Éditions 2012) as well as Rejeb Haji’s *De la Révolution* (Chroniques 2011-2014) offer insights onto this scenario that are, in turn, intriguing, disturbing and thought-provoking.

- Likewise Kraïem and Puchot. Vijay Prashad's *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter* (Oakland: AK Press, 2012) discusses the same issues in relation to the post-uprising scenario in Libya. Caroline Rooney's essay 'Sufi Springs. Air on an Oud String' (*Countertext* 1.1 April 2011 "Postcolonial Springs" Special Issue, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 39-58) discusses Salafism and Wahhabism in the context of the Egyptian revolt, criticising "an Islamism that combines puritanical religious piety with capitalism." (53).
- 13 The online portal of the Bardo National Museum can be found at: <http://www.bardomuseum.tn/> [accessed September 22 2015]. Subsequent to the Bardo massacre, President Essebsi pointed to the *Okba ibn Nafaâ* militia, often described as an offshoot of Al-Qaida in the Maghreb, as responsible for the attack. See <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/tunisia-in-bardos-aftermath/389039/> [accessed September 20 2015].
 - 14 Information regarding the Bardo collection and history of the premises is readily available throughout the museum itself, on various indicative leaflets and detailed brochures, as well as at the museum's very helpful front desk.
 - 15 I am of course not directly referring here to Tunisia's specific Neo-Destour Party, but to the re-awakening of a broader social-political philosophy. The June attacks at Sousse of course exacerbated the situation.
 - 16 See, for instance, Pierre Nora's and Jeffrey Olick's vast and noted *oeuvre* on memorial reception.
 - 17 Ibid. In the same essay, Harman begins to elaborate his own argument further by building on Lingis. I have decided to cite them together here because of the inter-related and complementary nature of their thought in this instance.
 - 18 I use Laplanche's founding question on the dead person's exhortation, as well as Laplanche's argument on its resistance of a pure hermeneutics of the past, in other studies of mine that focus on a number of different Mediterranean-literary contexts.
 - 19 Statistic given by Mohamed Kasmi, p. 126.
 - 20 Ricoeur refers to a "mnemonics of dispossession" in relation to crisis. See Ricoeur 391.
 - 21 Ricoeur 384. I use this quote from Ricoeur in other studies of mine that focus on the Mediterranean-literary context.
 - 22 Walter Benjamin, Harry Zohn trans., Hannah Arendt ed., *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007 [1968]), p. 257. I use this quote from Benjamin in other studies of mine focused on the Mediterranean-literary context.
 - 23 Ricoeur, p. 12. I find the potential for critical association between Ricoeur's *semeia*, Quentin Meillassoux's work on human finitude and Fredric Jameson's discussion of what he terms the historical "preterite" in his *The Antinomies of Realism* to be productive of many further associative possibilities.



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