

# GEORGES SCHEHADÉ:

## THE AVAILABLE LANDSCAPE

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*"Quand les yeux se perdent dans le sommeil*

*Comme au fond d'un puits les visages*

*Il vient un songe avec ses paysages"*

*Georges Schehadé, Le Nageur d'un seul amour, XVIII*

Georges Schehadé did not consider himself a Lebanese writer specifically, but he did not consider himself a French writer either. He used to say that in Beirut he missed Paris, and in Paris he missed Beirut. For the French-language writer of Lebanese origins, born in Alexandria in 1905, the question of identity, space of belonging, and thus of territory, is definitely relevant. If the Lebanese identity is multiple, as we know, and if such an issue, strictly speaking, stops being "problematic" in times of globalized culture, still, at the time Schehadé wrote the verses that are among the most significant of French-language Lebanese poetry, this issue used to arise in a much deeper way. The authors of the catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition "Georges Schehadé, poète des deux rives, Beyrouth-Paris" (1999) say that they have chosen this title "because he (Georges Schehadé) is probably the only one to have succeeded in this unlikely operation: making invisible the frontier between the two cultures that drive him. There's no tension, no identity conflict in writing, but only the natural, spontaneous merging of the two worlds (...) East and West." Of course, we should first consider the fact that Schehadé's East has no links to what post-colonial criticism and today's reader give as meaning to this entity. Far from the fantasy of exoticism clichés, Schehadé's East corresponds to an abstract concept. Considering that the landscape is above all a view of the country, which representation of the country does the Schehadé-landscape offer? The aim is finally not so much to try and identify the tangible territorialities in Schehadé's poems, as we would have tried to do with the paintings of Onsi, Faroukh or George Cyr who was his friend, but to approach the concept of territory based on his abstract content. The Schehadé-territory would finally offer itself as a metaphor, providing perhaps another access to what we call "the available space" today in Lebanon.

Then it is around the topos of homeland that a play like *L'Émigré de Brisbane*<sup>1</sup> is to be read. The play starts with the arrival of a coachman bringing a man to his homeland village of Belvento in Sicily. However, the emigrant died

before he met the son he once had from a girl from this village and to whom he wanted to leave his fortune. In the last scene, we understand that the emigrant was not actually in his village; the same coachman in fact brings another emigrant to Belvento, this village that is not his, "for the love of aesthetics" (Schehadé, 1965: 183). But it does not matter; all villages look alike, the coachman seems to think, all the more reason to choose the most beautiful one. . . . because the country that the emigrant was looking for is a country that does not exist. Even if Georges Schehadé prohibited himself from any regionalism and from almost any explicit reference to Lebanon, his country of origin, rejecting any anchoring, preferring imaginary towns as a setting, we still understand that this plot of money and honor looks closely like a similar plot that could have happened in a village in Mount Lebanon. Because indeed, all villages look alike the moment the one we are seeking is in a "lost country", a country that is everywhere and nowhere, and that, even if it sometimes matches the shape of a small village like Belvento, or like Paola Scala, Mr. Bobl'le's village, is still elsewhere. This is because Schehadé's theatre is more about poesis than mimesis.

Therefore, the same thing applies, more broadly, to Schehadé's poetry that suggests, more than it describes, elements of landscape that we can perceive as an evocation of the country. And in that way, the poetic representation is necessarily abstract. It is based on the "said" as much as on the "non-said", just like in painting where the fullness refers to the void whose presence, at the heart of the space of representation, is as important as the fullness presence that it has to reveal, to designate. In poetry, the "said" designates the "non-said", and vice versa.

In addition, the designation of places being deliberately elliptical in Schehadé's work, the mental landscape that results is then doubly abstract, scattered across a constellation of metaphors that, while designating it, dissolve its objective shape. These metaphors allow the poet to anchor in a non-defined space, although it would be more accurate to talk, by recalling the words of Michel Chiha (1938), about an "intuition" of landscape or, anyhow, about a landscape whose essence is poetic.

Therefore the poetry of Georges Schehadé gives shape to a topography of the "homeland" that a certain number of periphrases refer to: "La Terre heureuse" (the happy land), "la terre natale" (the native land), "ce souvenir d'un autre monde" (the memory of another world), "le pays lointain" (the faraway country) or "le pays rêvé" (the dreamt country), also called "le pays d'infortune" (the country of misfortune), which is metaphorically designated as "un jardin sans pays" (a countriless garden). . . . At the heart of Schehadé's poetry, the topos of the garden activates a nostalgic feeling of the lost paradise, associated with and backed by a constellation of places: "la Montagne" (the mountain), "les vergers d'exil" (the orchards of exile), "les plages familières" (the familiar beaches), "la prairie" (the prairie) and more.

The use of these topos sometimes narrows to recall "la Maison" (the house), or "la Chambre" (the room), then dissolves again in an "Asie joliment longue" (a beautifully long Asia), whose limits have become blurred, taken in the distance of space and time. In a certain way, if the symbolic material of the Schehadé paradise relates to the Lebanese reality, the space that we are discussing is to be further considered as space of memory, a built space, certainly a transfigured representation of known or dreamt spaces. Rather than a territory, a reverie of lost spaces takes shape, and that helps an imaginary geography to emerge, one of a territoriality that could be called "poetic". The only territory that Schehadé's poetry seems to claim is the territory of words. It is decidedly abstract, understood in the conceptual meaning but also in the pictorial one: a landscape where figures are eventually nothing but figures of speech.

If we consider finally that the country in Schehadé's poetry is ontologically abstract, in the sense that its essence itself prohibits it from materializing in a territory, and that it only makes sense because it does not exist, then the representation of the country that reaches us is subject to a process of derealization that, in fact, places its reality on bail. The available space that Schehadé's poetry talks about is primarily deterritorialized.

The work of Georges Schehadé continues to tell us to this day about the lost country, about this garden from another time, in this "beautifully long Asia" in which we live, because the work of Schehadé has accents of universality. And the questions his work raises, related to identity and exile, are more than ever current. Schehadé's work is then also deeply anchored in the contemporary.

From there, the available landscape is the one that delivers the poetry that nourishes our hinterland with presence absence. If we are looking for real territories, turning to this presence is an approach that brings disenchantment because it leads to absence. It is the place where the landscape is lost, and thus where we get lost. There is therefore no access to territory through the Schehadé poetry, as if his poetry was its definitive and radical denial. Because there is nothing more than poetry to look for in Schehadé's poetry. It is this poetry that we are intended to live in, as Hölderlin, and Heidegger after him, invite us to do.

Conversely though, if we turn to this absence, we might be able to spot presence and find the way back. The return to the country, to its real or fantasized territorialities, and to what this concept still contains of possible availability.

## FOOTNOTES

1. The play was published for the first time in 1965 by Gallimard and played for the first time in Munich in 1965, then at the Théâtre National de Belgique in 1966 and at the Comédie-Française in 1967, directed by Jacques Mauclair. It was remounted in Arabic (in a new version by Issa Makhlouf) in 2004, in the frame of the Baalbek International Festival, by Nabil El Azan, and was accompanied on piano by Zad Moultaqa.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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**Nayla TAMRAZ** is a Lebanese writer, art critic, curator, researcher and professor of Literature and Art History at Saint Joseph University of Beirut. She obtained her PhD in Comparative Literature (Literature and Art) from the New Sorbonne University (Paris III) in 2004. Along with teaching Literature and Art History, Nayla Tamraz has also been, from 2008 to 2017, the Head of the French Literature Department at Saint Joseph University of Beirut. In 2010, she created and launched the MA in Art Criticism and Curatorial Studies that she heads. She has also designed, organized, curated and co-curated several cultural events including the symposium "Littérature, Art et Monde Contemporain: Récits, Histoire, Mémoire" (2014, Beirut) and the exhibition "Poetics, Politics, Places" that took place in Tucumán, Argentina, from September 22 to December 2017, in the frame of the International Biennale of Contemporary Art of South America (BiennialSur). Nayla Tamraz' current research explores the issues related to the comparative theory and aesthetics of literature and art, which brings her to the topics of history, memory and narratives in literature and art in post-war Lebanon. Since 2014, she's been developing a multi-disciplinary seminar and research platform on the paradigm of modernity. Her research leads her to question the relationship between poetics and politics as well as the representations associated to the notion of territory.