

Mustapha Tlili

### The city—angst, freedom and cries

The city is pervasive in my novels— New York, above all, where I became a writer— but my roots and unquenched yearning are those of a small town boy.

My two most recent novels—*Lion Mountain\** and *Un après-midi dans le desert\*\**— brought me forty years later back to where all started—to Feriana, my small home town, lost in the nowhere of central Tunisia, in the vast, arid and solitary lands that made me dream of the big cities I first encountered and marveled at in our one-room school, in excerpts from the great masters—Balzac, Pierre Loti, Tolstoy, Fitzgerald...

Contrary to what both logic and popular wisdom might say, New York remains for me the closest thing to a small town, or rather a collection of small towns. With its lovely name of Turtle Bay, my neighborhood of over thirty years has filled me with an exquisite sense of warmth, belonging, familiarity and simple humanity only a small town such as Feriana might seem to impart. After an absence of two weeks who in the neighborhood doesn't feel the need to ask you where you were and of course whether you have brought them something from the wonderlands of the far elsewhere...

Yet New York is also the city of anonymity and freedom, of live-and-let-live. The characters in my early novels—*La rage aux tripes,\*\* Le bruit dort\*\**, *Gloire des sables\*\**— experience a permanent state of anxiety rooted in the abstraction of metropolitan life. They also engage in transgression, flout their childhood values. It's their claim to freedom—albeit one tainted with a feeling of guilt each time they gobble another glass of whiskey or bed another blonde, not legally theirs.

Exile is man's fate in the city. Abstraction, anxiety and transgression define big city life and make of all of us exiled yet free strangers. This has never been more so than today, in the age of the cell phone, when you see people walking in Manhattan's canyons, talking into their microphones, giving the impression that they are engaged in a heated debate with themselves—the highest state of anxiety.

On the other hand, cities of the Orient and of Islam in particular— Cairo, Damascus, Fez, to name a few— overwhelm you with their warmth. Even when their days of glory have passed, they continue to exude a welcoming energy and an enveloping presence that make you feel you are a member of a large family, protected and desired, not a stranger left on your own, an individual lost in the vast, abstract, cold web of big, modern Western cities connections.

One should not however forget the price one pays for the warmth of the Oriental metropolis—less room for personal freedom, more social pressure to conform, a slow death of the mind even if the soul is happy and thankful.

Fez's example is striking in this regard. The ancient city that is striving today, as it did for centuries when it was the capital of an illustrious empire, makes you immediately feel welcome, but at the same time bombards you with warning signals to alert you that your margin of freedom could soon be put at risk if you let yourself succumb without further deliberation to the innocent delight of mint tea offered by the first merchant you stop by in your unsuspecting exploration of the souk in search of its legendary conviviality. After the mint tea comes the questioning about your life and the naked intrusion in your private affairs, and slowly you feel sucked into the lulling depth of a pleasant life without the angst but also without much freedom...

Freedom and angst are themes that haunted some of 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest writers—Sartre, Camus, Saint-John Perse. Malraux for his part chose the revolution as an escape, as an antidote to angst. In my "New York city novels" the main character also ends up taking off for the unknown of the struggle, as an escape from the ravages of angst and bitter memories...

Writing in my 30<sup>th</sup> floor kitchen late into the night, I used to see the glorious twin towers of the World Trade Center, my big buddies. They kept me company and made me feel safe in the vastness of New York's forbidding night. When they were struck I felt the pain deep in my heart, and wept. My latest novel—*Un après-midi dans le desert*—bears witness.

All New Yorkers wept that day of "infamy." We were all brothers and sisters that day, hugging each other and weeping together in the streets of the city, vowing together to never let the horror of that day happen again. Abstraction and angst were banished from our lives that day—for a moment at least. Everything was real—the pain, the cries, the trembling. What more real than the acid odor of burning human flesh? Yet in the cafes of Cairo, Damascus and Fez people continued to talk of conspiracy. Two worlds in collusion...

---

\*Little, Brown

\*\*Gallimard