

The New Brachylogy as Thinking Fictions in the Writings of Abdelfattah Kilito: The Case of The Arabs and the Art of Storytelling: A Strange Familiarity and The Tongue of Adam

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ABSTRACT

Abdelfattah Kilito's writings explore the possible interactions between the movement of thought and fictional experience. This new conception of contemporary narrative is not limited to a simple hybridization of literary genres but represents a new way of combining narrative invention and critical reflection. Beyond this intermingling of forms, the question raised is deeply delicate, involving literary, rhetorical, biographical, socio-historical, anthropological, and psychoanalytic aspects. Kilito, who is reticent about intellectual labels, undertakes an exploration of the origins of thought, highlighting an ancient paradigm that touches on the reinterpretation of the literary text through fragmentary thoughts and meaningful images. This article aims to highlight the notion of laconic discourse and speaking silence, which, in Abdelfattah Kilito's work, fuels both his fictions and his reflections. For the writer, language becomes the allegory of thought, the very terrain on which it unfolds, through a reading grid dominated by a multiplicity of

interpretations. Kilito uses words to solicit an experience of thought, one from which emerges an emotion of life or reflection that eludes him. The discourse is transformed into a string of condensed ideas, called brachylogical, whose characteristics this analysis explores.

Keywords: fiction, brachylogy, reflection, fragmentation, essay

1. Introduction

Abdelfattah Kilito's work is imbued with fictional reflections, in the sense that essayistic writing, a fragmented literary genre where narrative dimensions and poetic perspectives combine, is full of intellectual activity highlighting a clear tension between the author's philosophical and artistic aims. Indeed, contemporary literature aims to question the scope of narrative discourse while establishing the link between reality and fiction, notably through the aesthetics of brevity and verbal conciseness.

The laconic style, precise thought, and brevity of the recounted facts are all elements that constitute Abdelfattah Kilito's writings. Through the dialogue between fiction and reflection, Kilito redefines the contours of the essay, a genre that serves as a pretext for fictionalizing reality. Writing becomes the expression of profound reflection to question literature by frequenting imaginary literary texts to establish a dialogue between the author's ideas and the fictional text. To this end, the return to classical scholars marks not only an omniscience representative of the critical spirit that Kilito evokes in his work, but also a reconfiguration of the scriptural eloquence in vogue in contemporary literature. Barthes mentions that "*it seems that Arab scholars, when speaking of the text, use this admirable expression: the certain body. What body? We have several; the body of anatomists and physiologists is the one that science sees or speaks of: it is the text of grammarians, critics, commentators, and philologists.*"¹ This conversational spirit, marked by judicious rhetorical articulations between the written and the oral, seems to clarify the boundaries between fiction and reflection while disentangling the secular thoughts of narrativity, which, for its part, abstains from any attempt to innovate classical rhetoric. It must be said, in this sense, that the demands of the conjunctions of the contemporary narrative constrain the biographer in his reflexive approach and judge the veracity of his fictional intention.

As a good storyteller, Abdelfattah Kilito makes the background of his fictions, written mainly in a brachypneic form, the essay or the short story, which mark his enthusiasm for so-called brief forms, as in *The Language of Adam*², *The Quarrel of Images*³, and *The Arabs and the Art of Narrative. A Strange Familiarity*⁴, or *You Will Not Speak My Language*⁵, to name but a few, is a space of literary creation where the very essence of brachylogical practice operates: the pleasure of the brief and the quest for accuracy in the text, and therefore the

accuracy of ideas. Kilitian writing, from a narratological point of view, gives food for thought on a dialogical philosophy of the text, which is based on this aesthetic of the interweaving of classical genres: a call for reflective discourse, inviting the reader to explore what the text expresses beyond its lines, and to read within the maze of thought what the lines seem to immediately state.

2. The essay or the initiatory narrative of a fragmentary thought

In keeping with the linguistic tradition, A. Kilito infuses his texts with the art of concision. Drawing from the fertile ground of Arabic literary tradition, the author, in his work *The Arabs and the Art of Narrative: A Strange Familiarity*, engages in the exercise of the brachylogical spirit, pertinently rereading the classical cultural heritage of Arabic literature. Indeed, a few lines are enough for the reader to deduce the enunciative power that gives the narrative the density of a condensed thought, even the idea of a pensive fiction reduced to an inextricable sequence of words and sentences. Moreover, the rereading of ancient texts, commenting on them in an artistically sober style, suggests the creation of works that are said to be "*open*"⁶ to the different reactions of the reader, whether imaginative or emotional, thus oscillating between two universes, Western and Eastern, classical and modern, without harming the essence of the critical aim conveyed in the text. "*In reading ancient works, I was both attracted and disconcerted by a teeming reserve of marginal texts,*" he asserts, "*that no one really takes seriously [...]. Sayings and verses that comment on primordial times, reported by 'logographers' who seem to adhere to them without reservation*".⁷ This statement reflects the pleasure that the classical forms of Arabic literature provide, not only in the author's vision, a copyist fascinated above all by the Arabian Nights, but also in his creation, which, it seems, claims to be nourished by the verbal power of the fragment, of literary commentary, and even of fictional hypertrophy.

¹ Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte*. Édition du Seuil, (1973), p.26.

² Abdelfattah Kilito, *La langue d'Adam*. Éditions Toubkal, 1999.

³ Abdelfattah Kilito, *La querelle des images*, Éd Eddif, Casablanca, 1995.

⁴ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Les Arabes et l'art du récit. Une étrange familiarité*, Paris, Actes Sud, coll. « Sindbad », 2009.

⁵ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Tu ne parleras pas ma langue*, Éd Eddif, Casablanca, 1995.

⁶ Nous faisons ici référence à l'œuvre d'Umberto Eco, *L'œuvre ouverte*, publiée aux éditions du Seuil en 1965, où l'auteur met en relief les limites de l'interprétation de l'œuvre qui, parfois, échappe à son auteur, mais qui offre de multiples lectures poétiques, qui, elles, surgissent du monde intérieur du lecteur.

Reinterpreting the unspeakable by rereading the classical texts of Arab-Muslim culture, in an effort to transgress the hierarchy of canonical exegeses by updating them, seems to constitute a decisive turning point that A. Kilito brings about in *Les Arabes et l'art du récit, une étrange familiarité*⁸, a particularly significant work that permeates the practice of fragmentary writing, among others, in the essay. Little by little, the pages of this book are scattered with commentaries on classical texts dating back several centuries earlier, such as *The Thousand and One Nights*, *The Book of the Misers* by Al Jâhiz, *Error and Deliverance* by Ghazali, and *Kalila and Dimna*, to name but a few, which feed the author's theoretical reflection on the question of literary genres. He demonstrates with scathing irony, and through the art of quotation, I quote: "*Another important phenomenon in classical writings: it is the quotation. Besides its didactic function, it is often a pretext for a deployment of erudition, but, contrary to what one might think at first glance, it is far from being a lazy solution for writers lacking inspiration,*"⁹ declares Kilito. A statement which, by its very conciseness, is in our eyes the characteristic feature of the brachylogical perspective that Kilitian writing takes on. In other words, the approach Kilito adopts in his writings places the reader, especially the knowledgeable one, in a position to rethink the classical heritage by offering them significant fragments in which the author's fictional reflections crystallize. Kilito's commentaries, through a transgressive overlapping of traditional narrative forms, reveal his temptation for a thinking fiction, one that borrows narrative illusion from narrative with the intention of questioning literature through the reduction of discourse, its narrowing. "*From quotation to plagiarism, there is sometimes only one step, and, all things considered, plagiarism is an art, but few are those who excel at it*"¹⁰.

This shows that the use of brevity is a conscious choice in Kilito's writings, which are full, from a brachynoetic perspective, of the author's erudition, which tends to leave his

intellectual mark on the narrative framework of "*narrative prose*."¹¹

We will therefore attempt, through this article, to highlight the dialogue that A. Kilito establishes, from the outset, between literary genres, by a sort of demystification of generic forms, thus assigning to the narrative discourse the allegory of an underlying philosophical reflection. From then on, what meaning should be attributed to the abundance of references to classical Arab authors? Or again, what significance should be given to these fictions carrying reflections questioning literature, Western as well as Eastern, and to the stories of the writer in question? So many critical questions that aim to clarify the issues of Kilito's writing push us to underline the recurrence of the hybridity of the style that allows him to approach the real from the fictional by advocating the essay as a demonstration of his own thought. It will therefore be understood that fiction, as a mode of employment, serves as a pretext for the author while aiming to disconcert the reader and preserve him from boredom. In *Parler au Prince*¹², speech appears as a laboratory of thought, a philosophical meditation carried by an aesthetic that eludes the linearity of the novelistic narrative: "*Ibn Abî Mahallî grasps the message and, bursting into tears, pronounces a memorable sentence in which he sums up his entire adventure: 'We wanted to repair religion, and we have gone astray,' and the author comments: 'The intention that animated him was praiseworthy; he wanted to consolidate and strengthen religion (aradnâ an najbura-d-dîn), but he only ended up corrupting and ruining it (fa atlafnâh).*"¹³ Without plunging the reader into the maze of the commented scene, Kilito, alone able to grasp the complexity of the Arabic language in its discursive dimension, which, being part of the cultural heritage of the Arabs, was welcomed with fascination in Europe, as he mentions in his essay *Al-adab wa L-iriyâb*,¹⁴ most of whose chapters are evoked, in the French version, in the book from which we extracted the passage in question, offers him an

⁷ A. Kilito, *La langue d'Adam*, Edition Africamoude, 2024, p. 17.

⁸ A. Kilito, *Les Arabes et l'art du récit, une étrange familiarité*, Ed. Sindibad-Actes Sud, 2009.

⁹ A. Kilito, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*.

¹¹ Abdelfattah Kilito, *La Querelle des images*, Ed. Eddif, Casablanca, 1995, p. 12.

¹² "Parler au prince" In *Les Arabes, op. cit.*, p. 48

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.48.

epistemic interpretation that tends, by means of embedded narratives, to question the classical texts by making them dialogue through reflective readings. He asks himself, in this same perspective, "What is the meaning of her tears?"¹⁵ The concern is not to recount what happened during the meeting with the prince, but rather to deconstruct from the inside, and with light humor, the aim of the speech to derive a critical reflection on the multiple antinomies contained in the culture of the Arabs, who, at the time when they demonstrated mastery of the poetic genre by raising themselves to the rank of "poet people," were judged by the orientalist themselves, who considered their poetry untranslatable due to the difficulty of the Arabic language, as the masters of prose. Hence, among other intertexts, the choice of the title of this book. Also, the last chapter of this one, A. Kilito devotes it exclusively to Borges, entitled *TWENTY-FOUR HOURS IN THE LIFE OF AVRROES*¹⁶, emanates from this brachylogical spirit marked by eclecticism that the author claims, through a good number of epigraphs and quotations that make it explicit. I quote: "In 'The Quest for Averroes,' Borges recalls this story and makes the philosopher of Cordoba say: 'Singular privilege of poetry: words written by a king who missed the Orient served me, exiled in Africa, to express my nostalgia for Spain'¹⁷." We learn with Kilito that the practice of the essay can, in no case, be done without being a keen reader of literature, both Eastern and Western; reading, of course, is for the essayist a fertile field that feeds his thinking fictions. Otherwise, how would he manage to economize on words to underline an experience of thought, one from which emerges an emotion of life or reflection that escapes him? It goes without saying that the story devoted to Borges's short story is eminent proof that he attributes to his language the status of a pensive, even "thinking," fiction, to use Franc Salün's¹⁸ term, in a fragmentary logic that makes the text a factory of thoughts imbued with dreamlike elements, since the

dream, as he defines it in *Dites-moi le songe*¹⁹, is an open door to the world, which helps its understanding by creating subtle affinities, sometimes remonstrances of an ethical as well as aesthetic order, between the textual enterprise of Arabic literature, often reduced to an orality that finds its origin in the stories of the Thousand and One Nights, and that of Western orientalist. It is appropriate, in this regard, that Kilito, by undertaking to revisit, with a critical eye weighing the bad and the good of the thing, countless classical texts, frees himself from this categorization, which places him in the approach of the comparative historian; he wants to be, rather, a writer-critic who opens himself to intellectual dialogue and has the art of conversation, which opposes and contradicts, but also one who thinks his language. "Because writing is already organizing the world, it is already thinking (learning a language is learning how one thinks in this language)."²⁰ This is to say that Kilito does not miss the opportunity to establish intertextual interactions between different universes and, therefore, different modes of reflection.

However, reading A. Kilito's works arouses mixed emotions, an inescapable pleasure that derives its originality from the fact that he deals with the unifying questions of literature, and this in a finely crafted scriptural continuum which, while remaining faithful to his approach, follows in the footsteps of Borges's sharp angle. Let us note, in this context, that the questions raised by Kilito with regard to Borges' writing are most often akin to aporias or improbabilities. In the case of Borges's short story, entitled *The Quest for Averroes*, Kilito calls into question the figure of this seasoned writer who finds himself halfway between two (Greek) words whose true meaning escapes him during his polemic with Ghazali, and Kilito says, "These words were tragedy and comedy." He had already encountered them years before, in the third book of *The Rhetoric*; no one in Islam had any idea what they meant. It

¹⁴ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Al -adab wa L-irtiyâb (Littérature et soupçon)*, Éd. Toubkal, 2007.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ In *Les Arabes*, op.cit., p.149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Professeur des universités, Langue et littérature françaises, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier.

¹⁹ A. Kilito. *Dites-moi le songe*. Paris, Sindbad/Actes Sud, 2010.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *Critique et vérité*, Éditions du Seuil, 1966, p.35.

*was impossible to avoid them; their occurrences were so numerous [...].*²¹

In this regard, we can cite another marked example of intertexts illustrating this brachylogical approach, which infers the treatment of the birth of the idea as thinking fiction. Kilito, in *From the Balcony of Averroes*, ingeniously offers the reader an initiation story marked by a poetics of narrativity, a poetics nourishing the influence of Borges, of the writer. This is manifested by a slow unfolding of the plot and an abundance of digressions. In other words, they emanate from an insignificant detail, then link up and develop through a demonstration soaked in references and arguments, and we notice the effects of clarifications and cross-references between the various theoretical and fictional texts of the author. An erudite narration that arouses the reader's curiosity and engages him in a reflective activity whose challenge is to detect the contours of reality, hidden under the folds of the false, transgressing. Subsequently, conventional conformity when reading fiction and, of course, previous essays. In Kilito's short story, the narrator wakes up one morning with a fragment of a dreamed sentence in Arabic: *louhgateouna-l-a'jamiyya*. Which translates into French, he specifies, as something like "our foreign language" (*From the Balcony of Averroes* 158).

He then embarks on a quest to discover the author, whether real or imaginary, of this enigmatic sentence. During his investigation, he multiplies, like Borges, hypotheses and bifurcations, which sometimes contradict and cancel each other out, thus plunging the reader into a state of doubt and uncertainty.

As for the Latin sources that Borges cites, Kilito undermines them by rectifying them. The translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* was composed by Abu Bishr Matta in the 10th century. The criterion of panegyric and satire coincide here with the two concepts designated by Aristotle, and, of course, this reflects a misunderstanding that, for Kilito, could obscure the unfinished connections between theater and Arab culture nine centuries after Aristotle. By the same process of irony, this

time through an interrogative sentence, A. Kilito rehabilitates the displaced language, semantically speaking, that Borges adopts in his short story dedicated to Averroes; he declares, "*As Borges says, Averroes 'was working on the translation of a translation.' 'If this is indeed the case, the philosopher from Cordoba has before him an Arabic version. How then did he come across the words 'tragedy' and 'comedy'?*"²² The interrogative form in this statement can be read as such a brief form of discourse, as Kilito seeks to establish the happy medium of the Borgesian idea by the emitting of a hypothesis reinforced by the "if," which functions here as a rhetorical question integrated into an extraliterary continuity. In Kilito, the text is not a familiar construction of the order of a traditional criticism, which turns into a string of theoretical concepts on the history of literature as a habit, a practice that does not touch on the depths of the strangeness of literature; hence his increased interest in ancient texts, which give him the pleasure of clarifying, by means of his bilingualism, similarities and contradictions.

It follows, therefore, from what we have just argued, that literary commentary, as the brief form assigned by Kilito in his writings, clearly marks a discontinuity with the classical generic forms and, thereby, calls into question the idea of homogeneity. Thus, advocating a text with an irregular, even fragmented, tone, moving away from the linear novelistic structure that enslaves the text, confining it to an interminable field of ideologies and theoretical registers, thus favoring brevity within the narrative. As a result, the narrative becomes a mnemonic exercise, a space of analysis where fiction and reflection are invited, concomitantly, to fully understand the *raison d'être* of the creation.

3. Language, an inherent aspect of fiction

Kilito's language aims to say less and reveal more. This premise suggests that, in *The Tongue of Adam*, the question of writing language serves as a unifying element in literary creation. The verbal power of a narrative fiction derives its originality from the fact that it invites literature, through linguistic and rhetorical modalities—epigraphs, exegeses,

²¹ In *Les Arabes*, op.cit., p.150.

²² *Ibid.*

quotations, interrogative sentences, or even references to texts—to break free from the yoke of macro fiction, and, beyond that, tends to transform itself into a work open to all interpretations. In the preface to this book (*The Tongue of Adam*), Kilito states:

*"Unless it was in the Epistle of Forgiveness, dictated around the same time by the blind poet Abûl 'Alâ Al-Ma'arri. The subject was already found; it seemed to me new and likely to attract attention, the question of language being central to everyone's concerns." I immediately began to comb through old books, where I unexpectedly discovered echoes, traces of the story of origins*²³.

It is clear that returning to the language of beginnings is of paramount necessity, insofar as it would allow us to penetrate the maze of linguistic fragmentation, the one that seems to be at the root of many tragedies. Thinking about it, one can see, with the simplest mind, that mastering several languages is an asset that tends to grant us improbable perspectives. The *Language of Adam* provides us with a poignant reflection on the first language of humanity; the author immerses us in a quest for identity, exploring the reasons for the diversity of languages and their proliferation over the centuries. Creation, then, it seems to us, is a diversification by divine will; it establishes it. Hence the question hidden within the book: are all languages equal? A complex question that, in many ways, can give rise to lively controversies on linguistic issues that seem to be formidable.

In the first chapter of this work, we can read: "[...] *at the tree of knowledge. Under this tree, Eve speaks with the serpent and then savors, with Adam, the fruit; both taste the pleasure of transgression and discover the difference between good and evil. Knowledge is thus inseparable from flavor; these two words have the same etymology.*"²⁴ A. Kilito establishes, from the outset, an emblematic relationship between language and food: the former, being a source of production of knowledge, is intertwined with the tongue, the organ of tasting, in a carnal relationship, which means that the literary text brings together, according to the author's explanation,

knowledge and flavor. And hence, moreover, the reference to Michel Jeanneret's book, *Des Mets et des Mots*.²⁵ The series of questions preceding the excerpt we have just quoted gives food for thought on this fragmented aspect of Kilitian writing, which marks, among other things, a sort of break with generic forms, thus giving rise to a fascinating intertextual web, proceeding with a process of elaboration of the thoughts of the writer-critic that he is. The original idiom thus constitutes a question of linguistic urgency that motivated the author to venture into the labyrinths of a centuries-old history that escapes ordinary mortals. He states that this question "*arose acutely at the time of the formation of the Arab Empire. Many languages coexisted there, and, in an atmosphere of competition, one inevitably had to question the origin of language, and therefore the primordial language, implicitly the best.*"²⁶

The use of a fragmentary style is necessary at a time when the author's thought does not adhere to linear language. Thoughts are expressed in words and letters when writing becomes an open space where antithetical forms, in this case, the explicit and the implicit, come together. Such a scriptural approach, punctuated by intertexts, ellipses, and subtle references, allows Kilito to render his texts silent and thus demonstrate criticism through suggestive writing. In an atmosphere of anecdotal narration that seduces with erudition and meticulousness, Kilito's writing is intended to be brief and unfinished. It solicits fictional phrastic propositions, placing the reader in an activity of reflexivity that, in turn, challenges them and condemns their certainties.

In this perspective, it should be noted that fiction is not limited to the simple function of stating captivating ideas through a process of mediation: it invites itself into literature through a polyphonic hypertrophy to better explain it. In other words, fiction presents itself as an absolute truth, a reality that constantly progresses within a plausible framework. This makes its mechanisms inherent in the reader's reflections.

²⁴ In "Balbutiement", *op.cit.* p. 19.

²⁵ Michel Jeanneret, *Des mets et des mots*, José Corti, Paris, 1987.

²⁶ Amina Achour, *Kilito en question*, Éd. La Croisée des chemins, Casablanca, 2015, p.93.

²³*Op.cit.*, p.16.

Conclusion

Understanding the aesthetic reasoning behind Kilito's fragmentary writing requires, first of all, a clarification of the interval between narrative fiction and reflexive narration. The latter is part of the rhetoric of storytelling, the art of saying a lot in a few words. Being summoned to speak and allowing oneself to be understood by the power of the unsaid.

Kilito develops a facilitator's aesthetic, emphasizing that his fiction embodies difference. According to him, in the beginning, "all languages had the same value; none had precedence, and none repressed or excluded the others. All languages were sanctified because they were taught by God. The plurality of idioms was synonymous with cohesion, and diversity with unity."²⁷ As a writer and thinker, Kilito creates an intertextual, complex, and erudite work in a rhizomatic movement where writing does not age. At this point, he questions the notion of origin. His work thus represents the sum of all that preceded it and constitutes a space where reading, reflection, imagination, and dreams participate in the formation—and reformation—of a plural universe. Through the Arabian Nights and classical Arabic literature in general, Kilito evokes the mixture of genres as well as the aesthetics of the heterogeneous and the fragment. He places himself in his own way within this ancient tradition, which gives his work its originality. In *Dites-moi le Songe*, the writer also emphasizes that literature is an essential tool for knowledge and interculturality. His texts present themselves as narrative essays and a plural voice, favoring an innovative creation that combines different discursive genres. The textual hybridity between the essay and the narrative prevents the revival of the old dichotomy between these two forms. Kilito also considers "writing as a dialogue with the masters of the past" and as a rehabilitation of writers' criticism, a creative criticism that draws on literary theory and metaphorical images within the work. This is developed—in Kilito's case—from palimpsests and questions.

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²⁷ *Op.cit.* p. 24.