

Hubert Haddad

Geometry of a Dream

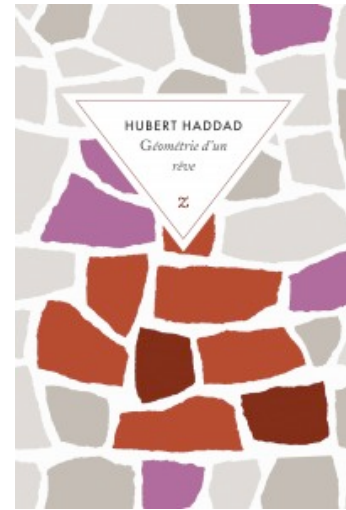
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TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH

BY LOUISE LALAUURIE



Biography Hubert Haddad was born in Tunis in 1947. He published his first collection of poems, *Le Charnier déductif*, in 1967. His first novel, *Un rêve de glace*, was published by Albin Michel in 1974, since when he has published numerous novels, short stories, plays and collections of poetry. His earlier work explored fantasy and magical realism in a fresh, hallucinatory light, while his later writings have focused on a critical approach to history. His protean approach to the craft of writing, and his long experience as a teacher of creative writing workshops, inspired his book *Le Nouveau Magasin d'écriture* (Zulma, 2006), a kind of interactive encyclopaedia of literature and the art of writing, offering a wealth of new literary games for writers eager to sharpen their skills. A second book, the *Nouveau Nouveau Magasin d'écriture* followed in 2007, exploring the role of visual art as a stimulus to the imagination, and featuring two hundred images (engravings, drawings, paintings, caricatures...) chosen for their evocative, inspirational power.

Recent novels (published by Zulma) include :

Palestine, 2007 (Prix des Cinq Continents de la Francophonie), republished by LGF-Livre de Poche in 2009,

La Cène, 2005,

Le Ventriloque amoureux, 2002,

L'Univers, 1999, republished 2009;

Tango chinois, 1998,

La Condition magique, 1997 (Grand Prix du Roman de la Société des Gens de Lettres).

Synopsis

In a remote manor house facing the Atlantic, on the coast of Finistère, a writer struggles to forget Fedora, the woman he loves more than life itself. Inspired by the spirit of this wild place he begins a journal, its pages gradually peopled with figures from fiction, history and the author's imagination, all drawn with the same, very real intensity: Fedora, the professional soprano who gives herself by day but withdraws at night, the Japanese student persecuted by her *yakusa* brother, the heroes of his own novels, mistresses past, or the American writer Emily Dickinson. *Géométrie d'un rêve* is an *Arabian Nights* by an insomniac storyteller intent on "telling tales" to himself, summoning the characters of Faust, Tosca and Othello to a novel of inexpiable jealousy and insane love.

Extract :

"No one has loved as I have loved. And yet there have been other women. I have known other mornings since that London night. I would burn each of my manuscripts in dark joy, just to experience such love once more, to betray Fedora in the very madness of thinking about her. To begin all over again, devoid of memory. But the roaring ocean waves are not the waters of Lethe.

Here, in Ker-Lann, the wind seems to speak, in a familiar voice reminding me of the saga of my faults and wrong-doing. With Fedora, I lost everything. My loneliness is such that I must take care to secure the doors and windows. At nightfall, a child's fear comes to me with the insistent inrush of dreams. It is a kind of infirmity, this inability to distinguish the living from the dead, the instant my eyelids droop. At my age, the accumulation of ash is such that the embers barely glow, and then only in the deepest sleep. Yet each sudden awakening is a premonition of fire. Insomnia does not light up the night with flames: ten times, I rise from my shroud to watch the crossed beams of the lighthouses on the Pointe d'Ar-Grill sweeping the abyss of the open sea, so like oblivion, beyond the reefs and the Iles de la Fée.

When a writer has no other outlet, it quite naturally occurs to him to keep a journal, of which I – even as an adolescent – have never written so much as a page. The exercise always seemed apocryphal, fake, like an album of family photos. "The most hateful lies are those that come closest to the truth," said Gide, an expert in such things. But now, I must confess or keep silence. And silence would be a kind of drowning. These pages mark the beginning of an unprecedented, absurd exercise, slithering down the slope of my remaining time: an attempt to keep my head above the dead waters of the everyday by some means other than fiction.

One Monday in October. The sky roars above the pines and ash trees in the grounds, and

plunges like a mountain torrent into the glimpsed ocean, a scarf of white tossing between the rocky shoulders of the Pointe d'Ar-Grill.

The following, overheard just now in the village pharmacy: "Would you have something to clam the beaks of squawking gulls?" A deadpan question from Braz, an old-timer well known for poaching in the creeks by torchlight. Is there indeed an effective remedy, prescribable to every inveterate chatterbox and gainsayer as a protective measure for their neighbours? In the meantime, I return from the dispensary with a box of sleeping pills. The Ker-Lann night will be deaf, and without mysteries.

When the sky clears at the right moment, daybreak in the cove at Ar-Grill opens a fan of diamonds, gold sequins and rose petals over the sea. It is a moment of solemn luxury, to be savoured still once the lid of spitting mist has come down until dusk. But the night was impeccably thick and heavy, devoid of spectres and will-o'-the-wisps. The moor beyond the grounds has the feral hue of a fox's back and the sea continues to shine like a vacant mirror at the base of the high rocks. "Those who know how to keep silent become children of the gods" (Søren Kierkegaard).

I have no plan other than to come as close as possible to *my truth* while steering clear of the genre's inherent pitfalls and approximations. It's a question of survival, of keeping alive what's left. The time remaining will never be worth one morning of my life with Fedora. I must explain myself, recount the essential details of the years spent in her light, her dark brilliance. Omitting none of the storms, the madness. And so it seems I could never have loved another woman more completely, despite the endless revolts, the feeble attempts at escape. Despite our truncated relations, like real or make-believe actors playing out the scene of a single day. In the role of the praying mantis, the brain-sucking spider, Fedora seemed quite deliberately to reduce our liaison to a struggle to the death, a coupling of insects in a shaft of moonlight. I don't doubt that she loved me, in her maniacal, distracted way. Her jealousy was, indeed, matched only by my own, and we played on it, like tightrope walkers on the brink of an abyss.

Subject for a short story: a man plans to commit suicide but is held back by the inability to attend his own funeral. Until one day he hears of the death of an exact namesake. Quickly, he sends a detailed announcement to his friends, and attends the ceremony in disguise, determined to put an

end to it all once the obsequies are over. With grim delight, he observes the effect (or lack of effect) of his disappearance on the faces present – those unique, infallible captors of true identity, the faces of those closest to us. Such an ordeal might very well persuade our disabused potential suicide to set sail for new horizons. No one kills themselves for so little...

Born of a dead woman, I was plunged into a torrent of fantasy. My maternal grandmother, albeit afflicted by inconsolable grief, was the most comical and inventive nursery nurse. These formative years easily explain why I became a novelist and story-teller. Out of vital need. Without it, the fiction of origins would probably have sent me barking mad. Elzaïde was barely fifty when she became heir to her daughter, dead in childbirth. She was still a fine-looking woman, with a strong face and ample bosom. A childbed fever had left her sterile and prone to eccentricities. Naturally, and with the widower's tacit consent, Elzaïde took charge of my care while waiting for a decision from the family magistrate, or the health authorities, which took some time. When I reached school age I was placed in a public institution, but remained under her care, and stayed with her at weekends and through the summer months. But long before that, from the moment I understood my first words, Elzaïde took charge of my fantastical, largely unmethodical education. My grandmother was an encyclopaedia: no phenomenon, no event escaped her unschooled commentary. She was possessed of an extraordinary if archaic imagination and a rich storehouse of exempla, variously fabricated. She explained the world continually and in exhaustive detail, with scant concern for the contradictions that added further layers of mystery to her extravagant pronouncements. Elzaïde gave me great satisfaction at the age of the question "Why?". My endless queries, finger pointed at the moon, enjoyed her unwavering, exalted attention. Later, I would remember her as an aged Scheherazade striving, through her stories, to halt the inexorable march of reality.

How I came to cut short my adventures and drop anchor in this remote spot, *Penn-ar-Bed*, is another marvel: there is nothing to hold me here but the savour of the sea-spray, the taste of departures and exile. As if I had rented an Egyptian tomb to enjoy the desert night, sheltered from the storms.

My mind or desire for fiction left me the day I understood that I was myself the prisoner of a preposterous story, from which I believed I could escape by taking refuge on this wild coastline. Pain in itself does not, ordinarily, prevent the pursuit of a piece of work – unless the excess of

implausibility invades your mental space. In my current, literally, irresolute state, I would no longer know how to provide that mix of distraction with the requisite dose of folly that results in a work of fiction, a novel.

Angels are the exception. We are all prisoners of our sex, whether openly acknowledged, suppressed or lost. And what we experience in others is this tearing apart, more or less effectively disguised. The end of a great love is always a kind of bereavement, the rejection of a state of grace. And yet it was so lightly undertaken. Joy enters our being unannounced. A supernatural energy, a kind of revelation. Chance dictated our first two meetings. It sometimes happens that we encounter someone we first met the day before, or the day before that: *a second chance* before the fatal anonymity of the big city drags them under forever.

I came alongside her for the first – and for me decisive – time under unusual circumstances. It was the ninth of November 1989, the day the Berlin Wall came down. The rain fell in golden sheets that evening. Installed in the back of a taxi, I was returning home passably drunk after a cocktail reception given by my main publisher. The Paris boulevards coursed with the confused bustle of autumn: crowds, car horns and lights. A chance red light and suddenly, the rear door opened. I was submerged in a rustling, fragrant wave of silk or satin. An immense smile, precious and perfect as a fine necklace of pearls, eyes like the cut gems of the soul and, on my cheek, a soft breath more troubling than a stolen kiss: Fedora had thrown herself in next to me, her hip against mine, pleading brightly:

"Quick, drive me to the Palais Garnier, I'm singing Tosca in two hours, hardly time to make up!"

She tossed a hundred-franc note onto the front seat. The amused driver quizzed me with a glance in the rear-view mirror. I was headed in the opposite direction, of course, but the idea of giving up the taxi and hailing another never crossed my mind.

"Fine, we'll make a detour, but please, put your money away."

"No way! What do you do for a living? An artist, for sure! *Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore...* What's your name? Do you have children?"

The sharp, quick-fire questioning trilled in the mouth of a coloratura soprano. Her agitation was driven by stage fright and a dread of arriving late. Turning on the charm, I declared my status as an author, and spelled out my as yet pathetically little-known name.

"I have read nothing of yours before long!" she exclaimed. "True, I only like poetry. Do you

know these lines?

I drink within your rift

I spread your naked legs

I open them like a book

In which I read my death."

The taxi continued up Avenue de l'Opéra. Fedora would slip away from me in a few minutes. Speechless with emotion, I searched in panic for a saving phrase. But she was already thanking the driver and me – thanking us both equally, it seemed. Already, the taxi was heading for the kerb, turning sharply to pull up in front of the stage door.

"Come and see me!" she urged gravely, playfully. "Tosca dies every night..."

We watched as she towards the door and disappeared inside, in a single dancing movement. Captivated by her scent, her voice, while the car retraced its route towards the Left Bank, I already knew – crushed by her gracile beauty her enveloping aura of prestige – that I would not attempt to see her again. "I do not exist. I have ceased to exist so that I may be yours," wrote Johannes, Kierkegaard's Don Juan, to his *giovine principante*. But in reality, when we feel destroyed, annihilated, thunderstruck by a momentary encounter, our urge to seduce quickly disappears in our emotional turmoil; and nothing remains but a sense of mortification, a deep pool of regret and disappointment to be wiped away, eventually, by the universal mop of time.

I could tell her story like this, if I had the heart: on her travels, *in great secret*, she changes, it seems to her that she becomes younger, that she truly becomes someone else; memories come to her that she has never experienced, or forgotten, as if she had been granted another existence, as if she had entered into the body and thoughts of another woman, younger each night, younger and freer, and so different, as if truly, each night, she became another person.