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edited by Silvia Naef & Nadia Radwan

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Articles

Silvia Naef¹

“Painting in Arabic”: Etel Adnan and the Invention of a New Language

Abstract

This article deals with Etel Adnan's complex and original relation with the Arabic language, and with her concern for the situation of wars and destruction in the Arab world. It tries to analyze how, by “painting in Arabic,” Adnan not only finds a solution to her linguistic quest, but also gives word to her political commitment to the region. And finally, “painting in Arabic” makes her one of the main representatives of the Hurufiyya movement, a fundamental modernist pictorial trend in the Arab world.

Keywords: Arabic language, French language, Painting, Poetry, Hurufiyya, Etel Adnan

The Arabic language has a certain aura for me, partly because we were forbidden to learn it in the French schools – and we were punished if we even spoke it. And because we spoke it neither at school nor at home, I was locked out of it. I speak it in the street, but can't write a poem in Arabic. This means I've made Arabic into a myth, into a kind of lost paradise. ²

Etel Adnan (b. 1925), the daughter of an Ottoman officer from Syria, and an Ottoman Greek mother from Smyrna, today Izmir, grew up in Beirut, then under French mandate. The family's language was Turkish while her mother spoke Greek to her, and she grew up speaking the two languages until the age of five.³ Adnan then went to a French school, where, as she states in the above quote, speaking Arabic was forbidden and considered a “sin.”⁴ Some of the pupils were in charge of spying on the others and reporting to the nuns: everyone who was caught speaking Arabic was punished, and a stone was placed in his or her pocket to symbolize this “sin.” So far, nothing exceptional, the fate of many in the Arab world, especially under French domination: Adnan recalls that she realized much later that other colonial subjects in the French empire as a whole, be it in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, sub-Saharan Africa or Indochina had similar experiences.⁵ With this went

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² Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Conversations with Etel Adnan,” in *Etel Adnan in All Her Dimensions*, Doha/Milan: Mathaf/Skira, 2014, 29–30.

³ Etel Adnan, *Ecrire dans une langue étrangère* (Paris: L'Echoppe, 2014), 11. Original English online version: Etel Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language,” *Electronic Poetry Review* 1 (1996), accessed 12 July 2019, www.epoetry.org/issues/issue1/alltext/esadn.htm, pages not numbered. Quotations are made after the English online version, but references are given to the French printed text where the pages are numbered.

⁴ Adnan, *Ecrire dans une langue étrangère*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*

the strong feeling, suggested at school, that speaking Arabic was backwards and shameful,⁶ as Adnan stresses in her *To write in a foreign language*. This led — and still does lead — many to abandon Arabic and adopt French instead, as a means of demonstrating progress on the way to becoming “civilized” persons. Adnan, on the contrary, decided she wanted to be an Arab, in spite of the fact that Arabic was not the language spoken in her family. “If the Arab world,” Adnan says, “weren’t forever at war, and so much under attack, maybe I wouldn’t have been Arab.”⁷ Being an Arab was for her a sign of resistance, the adoption of a refused and despised identity. This does not mean that Adnan is an Arab nationalist, understood in the sense that pan-Arab ideologies spread around the Arab world, on the contrary, although in her youth she sympathized with those ideas. In an online interview she gave in July 2018 to Judith Benhamou-Huet, Adnan stated that nationalism was a mythology, since each person is a synthesis of many things, and defined herself as a “pioneer of the globalized world” that we know today, having grown up and lived in so many different cultures.⁸ As Sonja Mejcher-Atassi observed, “the notion of ‘home’ has acquired a transnational and transcultural meaning for Adnan.”⁹

In 1949, Adnan went to Paris to study and as a Francophone by education and an admirer of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, she wrote poems in French. Her first poem, *Le livre de la mer*, was translated into Arabic much later, since it played on the grammatical gender of the words “sun,” masculine in French (*le soleil*) and feminine in Arabic (*shams*), and “sea,” feminine in French (*la mer*) and masculine in Arabic (*bahr*). Again, Adnan was trapped between the language she had been educated in and the language that had been surrounding her daily life in the streets of Beirut, trapped in the impossibility of translation or rather, as she says, her first poem would have been unthinkable in Arabic.¹⁰ In 1955, she moved to California, where she lived with few interruptions until recently, when she moved to Paris. Arriving to Berkeley was, to her, like discovering another planet.¹¹ Her English was then still very basic, but she immersed herself in the language and fell in love with American English.¹² She also fell in love with the landscape, the country, and its way of life: “Riding in a car on the American highways was like writing poetry with one’s whole body.”¹³ She started teaching philosophy, in English, at the Dominican College in San Rafael, near San Francisco. She then still saw herself as someone defined by French culture, but the war in Algeria made her realize that she had taken sides, “naturally and spontaneously,” against France. Her emotional involvement with the Algerian side of the war made it impossible for her to continue writing in French.¹⁴ Today she no longer feels this way, but at the time, as she writes, the destiny of the Arab world and its unity seemed to depend on the outcome of this conflict. Encouraged by the head of the art department at her school, Ann O’Hanlon, Adnan started painting in 1960, and this new adopted language allowed her to solve the conflict:¹⁵ “At that moment my soul was at peace, as if I’d been given the answer to an important problem.”¹⁶

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Obrist, “Conversations with Etel Adnan,” 30.

⁸ Judith Benhamou-Huet, *Etel Adnan: 7 answers in less than a minute. Behind the scenes with the painter and poet who has exhibitions in Arles, Bern, Marrakesh and also Massachusetts* (4: “How important is the idea of nationality to you”), accessed 12 July 2019, <https://judithbenhamouhuet.com/report/etel-adnan-7-answers-in-less-than-a-minute-behind-the-scenes-with-the-painter-and-poet-who-has-exhibitions-in-arles-bern-marrakesh-and-also-in-massachusetts/>.

⁹ Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, “The Forbidden Paradise, How Etel Adnan Learnt to Paint in Arabic,” in *Arabic Literature, Postmodern Perspectives*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Andreas Pflitsch and Barbara Winckler (London: Saqi, 2010), 313.

¹⁰ Adnan, *Ecrire dans une langue étrangère*, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

¹⁶ Hilary Kilpatrick, “Interview with Etel Adnan,” in *Unheard Words, Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America*, ed. Mineke Schipper (London/New York: Allison & Busby, 1985), 119.



Figure 1: Etel Adnan, *The Mountain*, series of ten drawings, watercolor and china ink on paper, 2014 (display on wall). Etel Adnan, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, watercolor and ink on paper, 2008 (leporello in display case). Exhibition at Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, 15 June – 7 October 2018. © Rolf Siegenthaler, Bern.

Adnan's commitment against the war in Algeria led her to join the protest movement against the Vietnam War, as did many intellectuals in the United States at the time. Many were expressing their opposition against the war with their literary work, and so did Adnan, in her first poem in English, "The Ballad of the Lonely Knight in Present-Day America," which was published in the ephemeral *S. B. Gazette* in 1965. She now had two new languages, painting and English, in which she could express herself.

When Adnan started painting, her work was mostly abstract, although she was inspired by surrounding natural landscapes. Starting in the 1980s, and for another twenty-three years, she painted Mount Tamalpais, which she could see from her home in Sausalito.

In 1964, Adnan discovered the leporello in a Japanese shop in San Francisco, a fold-out book that would give a new direction to her creativity, and become a way of uniting poetry and painting, the oral and the visual. On this very thin paper, Adnan started transcribing poems in Arabic, written by well-known poets, and rediscovered the graphic pleasure she had had in her childhood when she copied Arabic sentences that she did not understand. This feeling came from the way she was familiarized with Arabic. One day, her father, a Syrian Arab, disapproving of the fact that his daughter was being educated only in French, ignoring Arabic while living in an Arab country, started teaching her Arabic. He made her write the alphabet hundreds of times,¹⁷ and then had her

¹⁷ Adnan, *Ecrire dans une langue étrangère*, 13.

copying from an Arabic-Turkish grammar book he had used in his youth. Adnan knew the alphabet, but didn't know most of the vocabulary, so for her, who had always been fascinated when she watched her father write sentences in Arabic, it was more a form of drawing than of writing, of reproducing signs. As Simone Fattal puts it, speaking of Adnan's later artistic development, it "was discovering what the Chinese tradition knew all along: that writing is drawing."¹⁸

The first poem she "drew" was *Madinat al-Sindbad* (Sindbad's City) by Iraqi poet Badr Shaker al-Sayyab, who had died just one year earlier. Sayyab was, for Adnan, the first modernist Arab poet.¹⁹ At the time, it was the Nasser era, and Adnan was moved by pan-Arab ideas she had become familiar with after 1957, when she met students from other Arab countries at Berkeley. Since she could not compose poetry in Arabic herself, she decided to write poems by other authors.²⁰ As she says: "I didn't need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic."²¹

Adnan has a strong passion for Arabic poetry, including pre-Islamic poems. However, since her position is political, she "draws" only poems by contemporary authors, like the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish, whom she knew personally and who translated some of her poetry and of whom she says he was "constantly close ... to the existential."²²



Figure 2: Etel Adnan, *Wendell Berry, 26 November 1964*, leporello, 1964. Exhibition at Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, 15 June – 7 October 2018. © Rolf Siegenthaler, Bern.

¹⁸ Simone Fattal, "On Perception: Etel Adnan's Visual Art," in *Etel Adnan In All Her Dimensions* (Doha/Milan: Mathaf/Skira, 2014), 110.

¹⁹ Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 73.

²⁰ Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 58.

²¹ Adnan, *Ecrire dans une langue étrangère*, 22. Our emphasis.

²² Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 73.

She illustrated the lyrics of many other contemporary avant-garde authors, such as the Lebanese Yusuf al-Khal, American poets like Wendell Berry, and later on, her own poems. There was a cinematic dimension in the leporellos, a narrative, as Simone Fattal notes,²³ although some later leporellos are purely visual, as the ones she did of Paris rooftops and New York bridges.²⁴

In spite of the fact that she did not write poems in Arabic, Adnan wanted to be recognized as an Arab poet. She travelled regularly to Beirut and met Yusuf al-Khal, the founder and editor of *Shi'r*, the ground-breaking intellectual periodical which had an immense impact on poetry writing in the Arab world. Al-Khal also opened Gallery One, a gallery which played a central role for modernist painters in Lebanon and in the Arab world as a whole and which was the first Beirut professional art gallery. Al-Khal invited Adnan to contribute to *Shi'r*, by translating her poems into Arabic. This was essential to Adnan, since she suffered from the fact that some people thought that she was not an Arab poet because she did not write in Arabic. She comments: "My identity was in not wanting to be rejected by Arab poets."²⁵ The publication of her poems in *Shi'r*, the most prestigious journal for Arabic poetry and modern thought, allowed her this desired recognition.

Even though it initially resulted from her own biographical constraints, "painting in Arabic" found Adnan a place as an Arab artist within the movement called Hurufiyya. Hurufiyya – from the Arabic word "huruf," "letters" – is an artistic trend where the letters of the Arabic alphabet are used as an element of mostly abstract compositions. It is not to be confused with calligraphy, a genre which had a central place in Islamic art, as the first manifesto of the Hurufiyya movement, *The One Dimension* (Al-bu'd al-wahid) stated in 1971. Arab artists had started to use letters of the Arabic alphabet in their compositions in the late 1940s, namely two Iraqi artists, Madiha Omar (1908-2005), who then lived in Washington, and Jamil Hamoudi (1924-2004), who was in Paris. Omar, who had been interested in Islamic art and calligraphy, was the first to formulate, in a 1949 manifesto, the idea that modern artists should use the letter as a visual element in a modern art composition.²⁶ Hamoudi, who was in Paris at the time and working as an abstract painter, exhibiting at the Réalités Nouvelles salon, also made geometric compositions referring to alphabetic signs, although he did not, as Omar, formulate a precise thesis. Hurufiyya became a pan-Arab movement – the only such trend – in the 1970s and 1980s, after the Baghdadi group *The One Dimension*, under the lead of Shaker Hassan Al Said (1925 – 2004), issued its manifesto.²⁷ Painters all over the Arab world started to make compositions based on the letter. They had all been trained in Western-style painting or sculpture and clearly expressed their intention of being considered as painters, and not as calligraphers, as they are often inadequately named.

Etel Adnan never uses the term Hurufiyya in order to describe her work – she rather speaks of calligraphy, for instance, in her conversations with Hans Ulrich Obrist. We could however say that in the same way that *Shi'r* gave her legitimacy as an Arab poet, the Hurufiyya movement gave a place for her work within a larger trend which dominated artistic creativity in the Arab world for a long time, and which is still practiced today by some artists. The catalogue of the London and Dubai exhibition *Word into Art*, which presented artists from all over the Islamic world expressing themselves through alphabetic signs, says about Adnan: "Her *livres d'artistes* [...] have placed her with Iraqi artist Shaker Hassan al-Said [sic] firmly at the centre of the genre known as hurufiyya".²⁸

²³ Fattal, "On Perception," 110.

²⁴ Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 60-61.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁶ Charbel Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya, Art and Identity* (Translated by Samir Mahmoud, Milan: Skira, 2016), 137. Also published in *Modern Art in the Arab World. Primary Documents*, eds. Anneka Lensen, Sarah Rogers and Nada Shabout (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 139-142.

²⁷ For the English translation of the manifesto, see Shaker Hassan Al Said, "The One Dimension," in Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya*, 137-140.

²⁸ Venetia Porter ed., *Word into Art, Artists of the Modern Middle East* (Dubai: Dubai Holding/The Trustees of the British Museum, 2008), 53.

For Adnan, "painting in Arabic" is far more than merely an aesthetic choice, as it might be for some of the Hurufi artists, or a way to stress her belonging to the Arab world. Drawing poems on paper is part of her political commitment, which started when she arrived in California. Although she had written some poetry in French, her political work started with her poems against the Vietnam War, as in "Ballad of the Lonely Knight." She also wrote poetry, in French this time, evoking the Palestinian tragedy. *Jébu*, written after the 1967 war, published in 1973, narrated the story of the Jebusites, the Biblical people that inhabited the land of Canaan before the establishment of the Israelites, and of their fictional king Jebu.²⁹ The book, that some considered as anti-Semitic (even though the publisher himself was Jewish), caused some troubles in France, but was nevertheless translated into English and Arabic. Another text by Adnan was to be found in the same publication, *The Beirut-Hell Express*, written in 1970. In her 2011 interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Adnan says of those texts that she "predicted that it was the destruction of the Arabs that was happening."³⁰

Adnan went back to live in Beirut in 1972, where she worked for the newspapers *Al-Safa* and *L'Orient-Le Jour*. There she wrote, in 1975, after the outbreak of the Civil War, *Sitt Marie Rose*, her first novel.³¹ In this novel, which she finished in just one month, she recounted a true story. In *Sitt Marie Rose*, Adnan wanted to denunciate the tribal mentality still dominant in the Arab world, where loyalty to the family and the clan comes before other allegiances. The book's main character, Sitt Marie Rose, is killed by her own people, who thought that she had betrayed them and their "cause" by showing solidarity with the Palestinians. Fighting this tribal mentality not only had a social, but also a political purpose, since it could easily be used by non-Arabs, for instance by the Israelis, to divide the Arabs, as Adnan as Adnan declared to the feminist journal *Off Our Backs* in 1983, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.³² She had already left Lebanon in 1976, considering that the war was a "new gang fight between rival groups of men."³³

Her major text – containing strong visual elements – about the situation in the Arab world, *The Arab Apocalypse*, which took her a year to write between 1979 and 1980, referred to the Lebanese Civil War, but is – alas – still topical and her text could have been written today on Iraq, Syria or Yemen as well.³⁴ *The Arab Apocalypse* is more than a poem, it is a combination of the textual and the visual, since it includes graphic elements that constitute a part of the text, "as if the verbal language alone had become an inadequate means of self-expression to Adnan."³⁵ The far-away wars in Iraq affected her again, as she tells it: "Being in California, I felt I was two people, because I was like all the Americans, the same as my friends. But I had a problem they didn't have: I was worried about Iraq, and they were not worried to the same degree."³⁶ As Simone Fattal writes, Adnan lives what happens elsewhere as if she had been "right there."³⁷

This feeling is delicately and deeply expressed in the text Adnan wrote on the occasion of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, "To be in a time of war." With simple words, describing the banality of her everyday life in California, she involves the reader in the difficulty of being an average person living

²⁹ Etel Adnan, *Jébu*, suivi de *L'Express Beyrouth – Enfer* (Paris: P.J. Oswald), 1973.

³⁰ Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 80.

³¹ Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie-Rose* (Paris: Editions des femmes, 1978). First English translation: Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose* (Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1982).

³² Etel Adnan and Inez Reider, "Tribal Mentality," *Off Our Backs. A Women's Newsjournal* 13/8 (1983): 32.

³³ Adnan and Reider, "Tribal Mentality," 32.

³⁴ Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*, translated from the French by the author (Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1989). French original edition: Etel Adnan, *L'Apocalypse arabe* (Paris: Papyrus, 1980).

³⁵ Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, "Breaking the Silence. Etel Adnan's *Sitt Marie Rose* and *The Arab Apocalypse*," in *Poetry's Voice – Society's Norms, Forms of Interaction between Middle Eastern Writers and Their Societies, dedicated to Angelika Neuwirth*, eds. Andreas Pflitsch and Barbara Winckler (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2006), 207.

³⁶ Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 68.

³⁷ Fattal, "On Perception," 113.

in peaceful surroundings and her feelings of sorrow for what is happening in a country thousands of miles away, a country which she had visited many years before, meeting artists and intellectuals:

To wake up, to stretch, to get out of bed, to dress, to stagger toward the window, to be ecstatic about the garden's beauty, to observe the quality of the light, to distinguish the roses from the hyacinths, to wonder if it rained in the night, to establish contact with the mountain, to notice its color, to see if the clouds are moving, to stop, to go to the kitchen, to grind some coffee, to light the gas, to heat water, hear it boiling, to make coffee, to shut off the gas, to pour the coffee, to decide to have some milk with it, to bring out the bottle, to pour the milk in the aluminium pan, to heat it, to be careful, to pour, to mix the coffee with the milk, to feel the heat, to bring the cup to one's mouth, to drink, to drink again, to face the day's chores, to stand and go to the kitchen, to come back and put the radio on, to bring the volume up, to hear that the war in Iraq has started.³⁸

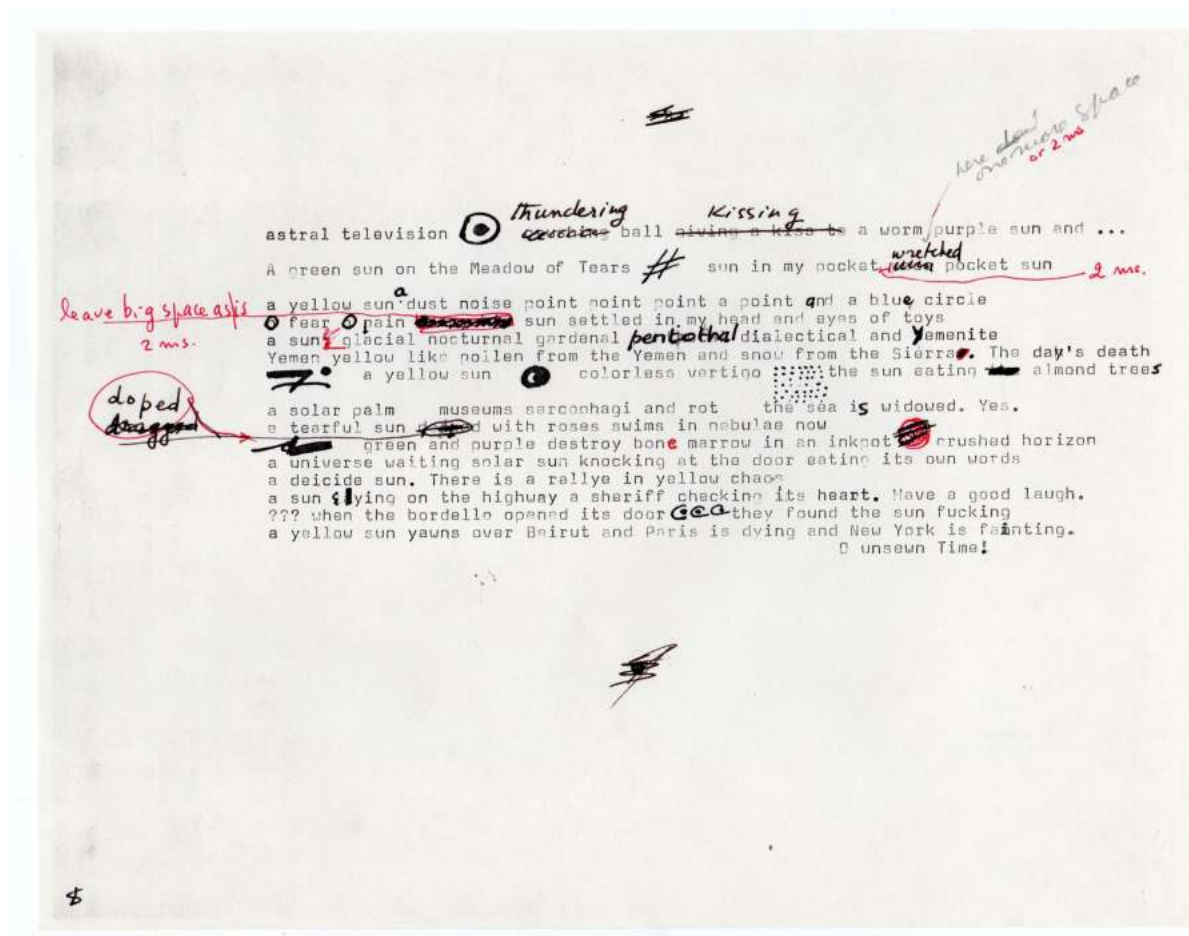


Figure 3: Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse* (Manuscript), 1965. Photocopies with handwritten notes, 72 pages and cover sheet, 27,9 x 21,5 cm, each page. Courtesy of the artist & Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg.

Again, in this text, published in 2005, we find Adnan concerned with Iraq's disappearance, the conviction that the war operations aim to destroy its populations,³⁹ and "eliminate a country."⁴⁰ Is

³⁸ Etel Adnan, "To Be in A Time of War," *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2005), 100.

³⁹ Adnan, "To Be in A Time of War," 105.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

there the fear that the Arabs might be "wiped out," as she says when speaking of the Native Americans in the United States? Adnan has developed this terrible lucidity over the decades, in a kind of tragic foresight, like that of Cassandra whom she mentions at the end of the text.⁴¹ This acute sense and strong perception of the tragedy of the Arab world is nevertheless associated with a deep love for life and with the satisfaction of having reached the age of 90 years, with a considerable literary and artistic production behind her and with the feeling that she is part of the universe, a friend of the universe. The day she will die, she says, the universe will lose its best friend.⁴²

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⁴¹ *Ibid*, 116.

⁴² Fattal, "On Perception", 102.

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Biography

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