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Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-René Huleu, eds., Melissa Marcus, trans., *Writings from the Sand: Collected Works of Isabelle Eberhardt*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2012 (vol 1) v + 570 pp. 2014 (vol 2) v + 619pp. Index, maps, chronology, glossary, bibliography, appendices. \$34 U.S. (pb., vol 1) ISBN 978-0-803-216-112 and \$42 U.S. (pb., vol 2). ISBN-10: 0803217552.

Review by Margaret McColley, Independent Scholar.

When reflecting upon Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904) and her life as nomadic writer my mind wanders to a line from the French edition of Isabelle Eberhardt's *Oeuvres Complètes*, written gracefully by the editors of the present collection, Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-Rene Huleu, who have through their own ethical treatment of their subject of inquiry become two of the most eloquent intellectual guardians of Eberhardt's written corpus. [1] Here they describe the author's eerie, untimely death in terms that seamlessly meld it with her artist's longing for the earth itself: she died, they suggest, "comme pour symboliser son désir du desert" ["as if to symbolize her desire for the desert"] (p. 443). One is reminded how few words can have lasting representative power. This is perhaps the reason why biographical writings and translations must be approached thoughtfully and even cautiously. For there is an intertextuality of the biography that can create misunderstanding *ad infinitum* if a biographer or autobiographical editor's unproven speculation gains credence over time. In the preparation of the new translation by Melissa Marcus, Edited by Delacour and Huleu, *Writings from the Sand: Collected Works of Isabelle Eberhardt* volumes 1 and 2 (2012), deep care was taken by Marcus to convey sensitively Eberhardt's implied meaning from the original French manuscript of her autobiographical and narrative writings. For as Delacour and Huleu write, "one can think that there is not a better biography of Isabelle Eberhardt than her work itself" (p. xix).

Because of the nature of Eberhardt's death, the term *posthumous* has particularly deep implications when used to describe her work, whose recovered pages are in some places "spattered with red mud from the deluge" (p. xxiv) that caused her life to end so suddenly and unexpectedly in the normally dry, arid desert. Indeed, the notion of *posthume* (I revert to the French) deserves some tilling as we dig more deeply into the fertile ground of these recently published volumes.

According to the *Dictionnaire Larousse* the Latin root of *humus* means [2]:

(1) "Matière colloïdale du sol issue de la décomposition et de la transformation chimique et biologique des débris végétaux." ["Colloidal matter of soil that comes from the decomposition and chemical and biological transformation of vegetable debris."]

(2) "Ensemble des matières organiques se trouvant dans la couche superficielle d'un sol." ["An Ensemble of organic matter to be found in the outermost layer of soil."]

One cannot help but notice three words in the definition evoking certain aspects of Eberhardt's life, death, and birth of a corpus following death: "Decomposition," "Transformation," "Organic." Each of these linguistic seedlings yields roots of meaning connecting naturally to an idea of Eberhardt that we now glean from her writings, as they have been made available to us through the present volumes. For

as a young writer with an old soul, her daily life was sustained through the very act of writing (composition), a life-giving force—yet her life-writings constantly reflect thoughts on death, decay (decomposition), destiny, and the mysterious *au-delà* or afterlife. As one will find reading the autobiographical, epistolary, and narrative portions of the *Complete Works*, the author creates a constant bridge between life and death that almost makes it seem as if she chose a death that would be suitable for her writings.

I want to cast light now on three aspects of this edition that make it stand out in Eberhardt studies. The first of these is that the editors grapple directly and assertively with what I will call “Barrucandization,” or, the problem resulting from the fact that the editor Victor Barrucand, associate and contemporary of Eberhardt, wrote over and finished manuscripts for Eberhardt in ways that obfuscate or ventriloquize her voice. Delacour and Huleu elaborate upon the idea that “under the pretext of flexibility [Barrucand] adds aesthetic and moralistic reflections of his own invention, thus replacing the author in a pleonastic manner in her text where she is always present through the acuity of her gaze” (p. xxii). Yet rather than removing Barrucand from that history of Eberhardt into which he wrote himself, they do more. For the purposes of this edition, explain the editors, and through their work at the colonial archives in Aix-en-Provence, “it was possible for [them] to reestablish words, sentences, titles, paragraphs, indeed entire narratives suppressed by Barrucand” (p. xxii). At the same time they give the reader instructions on how to identify any words remaining in the edition that were penned into Eberhardt’s corpus by Barrucand.

Secondly, though not by order of importance, this is the first translation in English of Eberhardt’s collected works. As such, the editors invite scholars whose primary language of expression is English into Eberhardt’s work (though I recommend a side-by-side reading with the French when possible for aesthetic reasons) in the hopes that, as a result, more contributions to the critical literature will follow. May this be so.

Furthermore, the editors situate their collected works within the history of writings by and about Eberhardt in their introduction by way of a kind of narrative bibliography (although not entirely comprehensive), and include a forward from one of the most well-known writers on Eberhardt in France, Edmonde Charles-Roux. Together, all three allow us to gain a thorough understanding of the *raison d’être* of this new edition vis-à-vis those of other scholars of Eberhardt and other moments in the history of criticism in the broader history of Eberhardt studies.

Lastly and perhaps most significantly the editors acknowledge the profound and inseparable importance of having a direct understanding of the intricacies of place in order to fully appreciate the quality of Eberhardt’s writings. As they were putting together the collection they traveled to places described in her writings in order to have a closer understanding of the lay of the land which Eberhardt desired so greatly to be absorbed by and to absorb.

These travels both inform the organization and guide the reading of the *Collected Works*. Throughout the work, for example, notes are inserted describing Eberhardt’s movements and notes she took en route that later became short stories, allowing us to have a kind of moving portraiture of her creative process along the path of travel, and to follow the process from raw, scribbled note, to unpublished manuscript, to final published manuscript. By taking an active interest in place by visiting points of travel or dwelling along Eberhardt’s North African itinerary, and recognizing these alongside her writings from and about these places, Delacour and Huleu honor Eberhardt’s intentions as artist of place.

I would like to observe, along these lines, that much has been made in past criticism of the romanticism of Eberhardt’s life that would suggest it was her primary goal as an artist to cast herself as a larger-than-life, looming heroine of her own fiction writings situated in colonial North Africa. I believe the *Collected Works* reveal, however, that Eberhardt’s short stories are more readily placed in the categories of autobiographical narrative and creative non-fiction. Further, her autobiographical writings (especially

selections from her *Journal Intime*) allow us to tap into a self-reflective process that could only transpire in the locations that inform her sense of self. This self-reflective process, rather than making of her life a work of fiction, allows her writing on the self to fit all the more readily into a European tradition of philosophical writing of which she was well aware. And this thought brings me back to my chief intention as reviewer of this collection: to underscore the idea that it is exactly the historicity and specificity of place in these writings that make them so unique and important in the literary history of European-born writers writing about North Africa.

I recommend the *Collected Works* for classroom use at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Let me suggest a few of several different approaches one might take for a series of discussions of the *Collected Works* within the classroom. Eberhardt's transvestism and engendered name-changing practice reveal a shifting identity that might be read in postmodern terms alongside an evaluation of these trends in the literary production of other late nineteenth-century European and/or French writers. The sometimes vitriolic criticism on Eberhardt within the context of postcolonial criticism is referenced by the authors in their introduction and would fuel a provocative discussion when read in conjunction with a selection of narrative and autobiographical writings from the *Collected Works*. While some critics have viewed Eberhardt unequivocally as a collaborator in the colonial enterprise, either through her lifestyle or her friendship with colonial administrator Colonel Lyautey, her writings reveal a certain disdain for environmental and societal problems resulting from the colonial project. Yet another point of interest for classroom discussion are the role of the paternal and maternal ties (telling of both rupture and tethering) as they inform the author's process of self-actualization through travel and displacement from Russia, to Geneva, to North Africa, to France and back to North Africa. Published in English from the French with a glossary of Arabic words used by Eberhardt in her original manuscripts.

NOTES

[1] Isabelle Eberhardt, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Grasset, 1998).

[2] "Humus." <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/humus/40669?q=humus#40576>, February 9, 2015.

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