Extracts from The article on Sabah Zwein published in 1999 in “Journal of Arabic Literature” by Brill (LEIDEN, BOSTON, KOLN).

To convey such living on the edge certainly requires a greatly disciplined use of language. Undoubtedly, shifting to Arabic gave Zwayn a renewed source of power and mastery of language. Reading her simultaneously in French and Arabic, then in Arabic alone, I can testify to a more brilliant skillfulness and a greater poetic maturity in the Arabic. The multi-layered subtleties of the Arabic language may have been more gratifying to Zwayn.

In order to articulate such frontiers of living and perceiving as achieved in the dramatic poem at hand, Zwayn’s écriture climbs up step by step, the stages of the narrator’s terrible experience with all that it had suggested of perplexity, lack of balance, madness, a deafening silence, and the incapacity to communicate except through a deviated, violent attraction /repulsion (sexual? Moral? The ambiguity is entertained throughout), and ultimately the existential need to pin it down in time and place, a year later.

In other words, the writing / écriture achieves its gesture and re-enacts simultaneously the couple’s tragedy. Speech breaks up, language falls apart, lines bend down and stoop in between words and meaning, meaning is oblique, shattered, scattered, words pile up in her brain and tear apart her memory. When she comes close to madness, words, too, become incoherent, and she witnesses their total fragmentation. When he increases in his cruelty, a deep cry is stifled within her, and the link between place and speech is totally cut. Time and space darken while speech splits apart. His violence was ablaze, madness prevailed, and words piled up in her brain and on her face. Words were on fire. Style starts to break through the distorted tongues, the distorted time, the oblique house.
And on the day of her departure, writing / écriture opens up like a gaping wound.

In the station where she waits for the train, she sees nothing. The bodies are dead and words are mere lies. Will she cease at this double negation? Will she cease to write? Zwayn admits in the last but one scene that she has lost the language in the maze of an écriture she has not yet undertaken. But she will continue to commit the sin of speech and the crime of writing. And the curtain falls.

In conclusion, I shall turn again to Barthes’ triad of language /style/écriture. To shift from French to Arabic was for Zwayn and existential search for healing the self, as seen above. Actually, during the war period when identities were blurred and the Lebanese lost their bearings, writing in Arabic as happened to Zwayn at an important juncture in her life, would have anchored her within the deepest layers of her being. Significantly enough, she leaves the fragments that formed her prose poems behind and turns to the dramatic poem we analyzed above.

(…)Style says Barthes, is “Biographical” and “Biological”. I purposefully left my discussion of Zwayn’s style unfinished to take it up now in my concluding remarks. After seizing Zwayn’s écriture and attempting to recreate it from within, I wonder whether one would be able to assert that her style is definitely that of a feminine author. Is it different from a man’s? Would I be confident in saying that Zwayn’s own body is in the making while words are born on the page? That her lover’s, as well, is brought to life then annihilated with the birth and, later the extinction of words? That she, as a woman, is directly in touch, viscerally in touch, with her emotions, far more than a male author would be? I have no answers to such questions.
This is definitely a “new sensibility” in the literature of “Wounded Beirut” be it written by man or woman. An aesthetic search defines it, a new vision gives it shape, and the liberating impulse to draw new inspiration from the devastating impact of a violent period. I leave Zwayn’s innovative écriture with open-ended questions about gender differenced, multiple linguistic usages, and mixed literacy genres.

Deeply anchored in the present, open to all possibilities in verse and prose, Zwayn’s écriture salvages the violent ad bleak mood by means of an aesthetic exhilaration, which seems to thrive on “living on the edge”. Zwayn’s total project started within the tragic epoch of her nation. It is still in the making, and she undoubtedly leaves her reader with great expectations.

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Extracts from The article on Sabah Zwein published in 1999 in “World literature today” by the University of OKLAHOMA (USA).

Sabah El Kherrat Zueyn’s dramatic poem “The Oblique House, and time, and the Walls” bears fascinating. Silence and isolation, a first person narrator is described with neither name nor features, except for her very white skin and her slim fragile body. She stands at the doorstep of an “oblique house”, undecided. Will she go in or will she return to where she came from, one day, by train? Unstable boundaries threaten her, as she walks in circles in a misty city. She stands at the doorsteps of that house as if at a razor’s edge, with abysmal depths ever present in her psyche. She weaves her tale between what had happened a
year ago and the need to capture those events in writing at the present moment. The theme of writing as an act of consciousness, giving life to the self, acquires existential importance due to the total absence of any other points of reference.

Zueyn’s story is stripped down to a few essential occurrences. The woman narrator comes to the city by train. She hesitantly steps into the “oblique house”, where four white walls stare at her, walls she often feels coalescing into a single huge cement edifice about to enfold and crush her.

(…)Highly charged language captures the recollected past experience, while body language rather than speech conveys the lived moment. Interestingly, Zueyn’s dramatic poem is constructed in seventy-five vignettes called “scenes”. The text could be performed beautifully by two mute actors, playing out a recitation by a backstage narrator. Highly visual, the scenes are evoked in syncopated style, with full-stops only at the end of each part. Thus, an accumulation of short, gasping sentences with commas – brief pauses needed to catch one’s breath – evoke this extreme relationship on the verge of a madness unto death. Pattern and rhythm are created through desperate leitmotivs. Words such as fear, despair, annihilation, anguish, emptiness, madness, and guilt fill the space of each scene, charged with an almost unbearable intensity.

Such extreme “structures of feeling” are dramatized by bodies’ bent over, crouched, bleeding, dislocated, fragmented, at the edge of an abyss, or otherwise terrified, hiding in bed beneath several blankets. To convey such outer limits of living and perceiving, the language Zueyn uses so brilliantly is composed of a succession of sentences which accumulate vertically, endlessly. As a result, those syncopated sentences thrown onto the page as if by blasts of wind create waves of highly compressed emotions at the point of explosion –
and indeed they do often explode. In the chaos of each instant, not only do sentences accumulate like blasts announcing the approach of a destructive tornado, but thoughts, feelings, and action follow in the same brutal way, contradictory, stubborn, submitting to the tyranny of the instant and the arbitrary reign of desire. Fear, hatred, love, attraction and repulsion – all merge to convey an atmosphere of tremendous violence and passion. Language and silence, living and nonliving, the scarred faces, the shattered selves are imitated stylistically by a broken-down language and the failure of words to express a primitive, sinful human condition.

Moreover, Zueyn’s spatiotemporal units seem to crush or smother the female narrator, who strains for air. The walls which are featured in the title stand for this claustrophobic feeling of being crushed as if by cement, by entire buildings, by the city itself, crumbling down on the horizon. In perfect mimesis words are lost. They struggled and break down under tremendous pressures. Like the wounded and bleeding bodies, words as well as are injured and incapacitated. Rescuing words, language, and meaning becomes the only reality foe Zueyn, an impossible reality.