This paper is occasioned by my personal experience of the Bardo National Museum in Tunis immediately after the 18th March 2015 attacks that claimed twenty-four lives, dealt a blow to the burgeoning political morale of post-revolutionary Tunisia, and etched an unprecedented mark in the memory of Tunisians of all persuasions. The bullet holes and fractured vitrines in and around the famed Salle de Carthage, where this country’s fabled antiquity meets its effort to bring about a cultural and political modernity, invite reflection on what Fredric Jameson has termed the ‘irrevocable’ function of historical trauma – and especially its modes of inheritability and transmission in a socius that is itself at a delicate crossroads of political transition. In such a fraught context, Lyotard’s ‘immemoriality’ must be read in light of what Jean Laplanche characterises as the ‘enigma’ that structures the retrospective quest: the ‘enigmatic’ retains itself as such since it always already embodies the noumenal essence of historical violence as a ceaseless question: “What does the dead person want? What does he want of me? What did he want to say to me?” (Laplanche). Reflecting on the fractured vitrine (and bullet-dented statue) of the infant Bacchus at the Bardo, and drawing on W. Benjamin’s and P. Ricoeur’s thought, this paper recalls the notion that time itself, as the fabric of retrospective or memorial passage, necessarily registers as the tension that obtains between an object and its accidents (G. Harman). This tension is what occasions the moment at which the ethical imperative of cultural rhetoricity – including the literary itself – becomes that of returning the representational principle to the materiality of history. Finally, I read Tunisian poet Moncef Ghachem’s poem “Cent Mille Oiseaux” (“A Hundred Thousand Birds”) in this light – as a poem whose “internal motor schema” (A. Lingis) is intended to subvert the poem’s own overt rhetoricity, hence making possible the installation of the communal memorial trauma as its ontological kernel.
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