

ARAB NOBEL LAUREATE, OVERDUE

Review by Norbert Hirschhorn

Adonis. *Selected Poems*. Translated from the Arabic by Khaled Mattawa. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2010. 399 pages. ISBN #978-0-300-15306-4. [Short-listed for the Canadian Griffin Prize.]

Adonis. *If Only the Sea Could Sleep: Love Poems*. Translated from the Arabic by Kamal Boullata, Susan Einbinder, Miréne Ghossein. København and Los Angeles: Green Integer 77, 2003. 150 pages. ISBN# 1-931243-29-8.

Adonis. *The Pages of Day and Night*. Translated from the Arabic by Samuel Hazo. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000. 108 pages. ISBN# 978-0-8101-6081-1.

Adonis. *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*. Translated from the Arabic by Catherine Cobham. London: Saqi Books, 1990/2003 ISBN# 0-86356-331-7.

Adonis, known as the T.S. Eliot of Arab literature, was born Ali Ahmad Sa'id Esber in 1930, in Syria to a family from the disadvantaged religious minority of Alawites (who now run the country). After being jailed in 1955 as a member of the irredentist Syrian Social Nationalist Party, on release he fled to neighboring Beirut where he established the ground-breaking *Majallat Shi'r* ('Poetry Magazine') devoted to experimental poetry. During the Lebanese Civil War, he left for Paris where he now lives. Twenty volumes of poetry and thirteen of criticism later he is a perennial candidate for the Nobel Prize. The Swedish Academy, however, seldom awards the prize to authors whose oeuvre they cannot read in a European language (Naguib Mahfouz was well-translated to English by the time his award was given). Adonis has been poorly served in this regard, that is until last year with Khaled Mattawa's sterling translations of Adonis' work completed between 1957 and 2008.

Adonis spent a quarter century immersed in Arabic poetry and literary criticism ranging from pre-Islamic days up through the 20th century. His findings were marvelously outlined in the four lectures given at the Collège de France in 1984 and published in 1990. Arabic poetry before Islam was oral, metered and rhymed, thus easy to understand and deeply felt, evoking emotion through the poet's performance. When the beautiful verses of the Qur'ān were put to writing two decades after Prophet Mohammed's death, however, it was determined that no poetry could now deviate from what was intended as God's final message to humanity. Rules were set down to protect the incorruptible language, and poetry was meant to serve explication of the Qur'ān. But, as Adonis explained in the afterword to Hazo's translations, codification subverts the nature of poetic language, 'for this language, since it is man's expression of his explosive moods, his impetuosity, his difference, is incandescent, constantly renewing itself, heterogeneous, kinetic and explosive, always a disrupter of codes and systems.'

Remarkably, Arab poets of the 8th to 10th centuries (Abu Nawas, Al-Niffari, Al Maari, Abu Tamman, and Al-Mutanabbi, among others) invented what we would recognize

today, even in English, as ‘modern’ poetry, which Adonis emulates. They wrote poems embracing multiplicity of meaning, evoking ambiguity, sedition, eroticism, the illicit, the mystical, things open-ended, even nightmarish; poetry as questioning and prophetic, where every word is assigned multiple meanings, Adonis further remarked in the Hazo afterword that ‘[The reader] no longer enters the poem as he would a garden whose fruits are within easy reach of his hand, but rather as he would an abyss or an epic.... Opening doors to the unsayable, [the poem] insists on the absence of any correspondence between things and words.’ As a further indication of these poets’ modernity was the development of extreme metaphor, the relation made between two disparate subjects (tenor and vehicle): the further the distance, the better. ‘Extreme convergence in extreme divergence’ said one critic of the time. (‘Esemplastic’, Coleridge called it.)

Predictably, these poets were attacked by the religious establishment, some even murdered. The destruction of Baghdad in 1258 by the Mongols ended the Islamic Golden Age, while the rise of the Caliphate and Ottoman Empire promoted a tyranny of poetic form, one dominating until just the last century.

In the West we also have experimental poetry – imagist, surrealist, ‘language’ poetry. But compared to Adonis, there is a certain poverty to it. I think this is because the Arab poet can draw on centuries of oral tradition and metaphor rooted in the physical and cultural landscapes of urban, desert and village life. For instance, Adonis (and Mahmoud Darwish) uses the evocative tropes of sand, sea, sky, oases, water, fire, earth, stars, wind., horizon, palms, forest, wounds, destruction and creation, and the madness of the lover for the absent beloved. The ecstasy and positivism of the Sufis infuses much of his poetry. His poetry is not linear – that is, one can begin to read anywhere within a long sequence of poems, and even dip into the middle of a poem; the experience for the reader will be as creatively rich. If Adonis’s divergent metaphor is sometimes extreme, provocatively so – as in the lines, ‘a breast dressed in buttocks/ I saw an elephant emerging from the horn of a snail’ (‘Transformations of the Lover’, Part VI, in the Green Integer edition) – one need only to admire the evocative ‘If only the sea could sleep I would make its bed beside me’ (Part VII).

It is a pity that Mattawa, an accomplished poet in English and Arabic, didn’t take his hand to ‘Transformations of the Lover’ whose erotic cadences and imagery remind me of the Song of Songs. Nonetheless, it is Mattawa, who worked directly with Adonis, to whom we will now turn for a deep appreciation of the poet. Hazo, also a fine poet, worked from literal translations provided by Arab speakers and thus lost all the white space and lineation that force the reader to move over the text as slowly as in the best lovemaking; while the Green Integer translators sometimes reveal a tin ear. Compare this excerpt from ‘A Mirror for Khalida’ (the poet’s wife):

GI: Beneath the Water. We slept in a cloth woven/ From the crimson of night – a night of nebula and guts/ A cheering of blood, a beat of cymbals/ A lightening of suns beneath the water./ The night was pregnant.

KM: Under Water. We slept in sheets woven/ out of night shade – night was oblivion/ and our insides sang their blood/ to the rhythm of castanets and cymbals/ to suns shining under water./ Night became pregnant then.

Adonis also wrote explicit 'poetry of witness', having lived through years of the Lebanese Civil War at its worst. Even here, however, the reader must be immersed in the delirium of words, but by concentrated reading and re-reading may attain a mystical revelation. Consider 'A Mirror for Beirut', as translated by Mattawa:

1. The street is a woman
who reads *Al-Fatiha* when sad,
or draws a cross.
Night under her breast
is a strange hunchback
who fills his sack
with silver howling dogs
and extinguished stars.

The street is a woman
who bites any who go past,
and the camel asleep by her breast
sings
to petroleum (each passerby singing past),
and the street a woman
in whose bed fall
days and vermin
and even man.

2.
Flowers painted on shoes
and the earth and sky
a box of colors –
and in cellars
history lies like a coffin.
In the moans of a star or a dying slave girl
men, women and children lie
without blankets
or clothes.

3.
A cemetery:
a navel above a belt
made of gold,
and a poppy-like woman sleeps –
a prince and a dagger
doze on her breast.

(From 'Stage and Mirrors', 1968)

A lesser poet could not regularly accomplish such fusion of the explicit and the mystical. Eighteen life members of the Swedish Academy please do take note.

I am grateful to Dr. Assaad Khairallah, Professor of Arabic & Near Eastern Languages, American University of Beirut, for additional insights.

Published at <http://toddsswift.blogspot.com/2011/05/guest-review-hirschorn-on-adonis.html>