Poems for the Millennium [Volume 4] The University of California Book of North African Literature, edited by **Pierre Joris** and **Habib Tengour**, 2012

This is the fourth volume in the series, *Poems for the Millennium*, begun by Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris under the imprint of the University of California. The first published in 1995 is titled *Book of Modern & Postmodern Poetry from Fin-de-Siécle to Negritude;* the second (1998), subtitled *From Postwar to Millennium;* the third (with Jeffrey C. Robinson as co-editor, 2009) presented *Romantic & Postromantic Poetry*. The series gives prominence to writers both within and outside the western canon, with emphases on political engagement and experimental forms, including poetic prose. Each omnium-gatherum is 700-900 pages long.

In the introduction to the first volume the editors describe their project ambitiously as a "global anthology of twentieth-century modernism with an emphasis on those international and national movements that have tried to change the direction of poetry and art as a necessary condition for changing the ways in which we think and act as human beings". Each volume presents 'forerunners' or preludes: poets from whom modern poetry takes inspiration. The editors write lengthy introductions to many of the sections and provide following commentaries for nearly every author presented.

The fourth volume, "incubating" for a quarter-century, as the editors tell us, is organized similarly but focussing on a region that is home to one of the editors, a region whose literature has been little seen in the West. The area stretches from Libya to Morocco and Western Sahara/Mauritania, known in the Arabic world as the *Maghreb* (the West) as opposed to the *Mashreq* (the East). Where the first three volumes are divided into 'galleries', the fourth presents the *diwan*, Arabic for gathering or anthology. The volume's unofficial title is *Diwan Ifrikiya*.) The introductions are a splendid resource for understanding the history, culture, context and prosody of the works, coming from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish traditions. All the works have been translated into English, sometimes via a French rendering of an original in Arabic. What is 'lost in translation' is more than compensated for by our discovery of such a treasury of poetry seldom encountered in the West.

An introduction to the anthology ('A Book of Multiple Beginnings') presents excerpts spanning one thousand years, from the sixth B.C.E. on, featuring such writers as Apuleius ('The Golden Ass'), Callimachus and his epigrammatic poems, Tertullian, and St. Augustine, all writing in Latin. The sly poem by Luxorius of Carthage, sixth century C.E., 'Premature Chariot', is worth quoting in whole: 'You always shoot out first and never last, Vico,/ because you need to get hold of that part/ you've softened with your pitiful, constant stroking./ The only time you're able to, somehow, hold/ your horses is when you let the sly guy,/who's paid you off, come from behind.'

The First Diwan gives work coming after the Islamic conquest of North Africa and the apex of cultural glory that was Muslim Andalusia in southern Spain. It was there that the *muwashshaha* developed, strophic verse poetry sung in classical Arabic, often accompanied by musical instruments. The form influenced the troubadour poetry of

southern France, as well as the *zajal* of the Levantine -- still heard today – that instead used the vernacular. There would be centuries of conflict between the language of the indigenous Berbers (Amazigh) and Arabic, between classical and demotic Arabic, both premonitory to that between Arabic and French and Spanish languages of the later colonialists. The oral tradition is presented in transliteration throughout the anthology, comprising fables, poem-songs, and proverbs. We are invited to chant the prayer-song composed by Abdeslam Ibn Mashish Alami of Tangier (1163-1228).

Women, too, were writing in the golden era of al-Andalus though their public authorship does not reappear until the 20th century. They are bold: Wallada bint al-Mustakfi (994-1091) of Cordoba teases a lover: 'Ibn Zaidun, though a man of quality, loves the unbent rods in mens trousers./ If he saw a joystick dangling from a palm tree he'd fly after it like a craving bird'. The Jewish Kabala has its origins in Andalusia, and well-known devotions and poems in acrostic form come from this time.

The Second Diwan comprises mainly prose, interspersed with poetry, written by genteel scholars to edify a literate audience on customs and social graces of foreign peoples. Still read are the travel diaries and journals, the most famous of which is by Ibn Battuta (1304-1369) who voyaged over thirty years from his home in Tangier all the way to China. His accounts are far more informative than those of Marco Polo. Equally enlightening to his time and ours are the travel diaries of Al-Hasan Ibn Muhammad al- Wazzan al-Fasi known to the West by his baptised name of Leo Africanus (1488-1554).

Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) from Tunis and Cairo wrote on the craft of poetry anticipating Mallarmé's dictum*, [C]e n'est point avec des idées que l'on fait des vers…. C'est avec des mots*" by writing "Both poetry and prose work with words, and not with ideas. The ideas are secondary to the words. The words are basic." And: "Poetry is eloquent speech built upon metaphoric usage, and descriptions."

The Third Diwan is titled 'The Long Sleep and the Slow Awakening'. The excerpts demonstrate the "stagnation of literary genres" between the 14th-19th centuries, following the fall of Granada in 1492 to the forces of Ferdinand and Isabella. Cultural output was further stunted by the Ottoman Empire rule. In its place, however, rose popular verse and song – devotions of love and chivalry called the *melhun* – still performed today.

The Fourth Diwan ('Resistance and Road to Independence') however, signals the re-awakening at the time of colonisation by Spain, Italy and France in the late 19th - mid -20th centuries. Brutal wars in favour of independence and against post-colonial dictatorships led to hundreds of thousands of deaths. We still feel the reverberations in our era's so-called 'Arab Spring'. Francophone poets were inspired by French literature, Sahwari by Spanish, and yet were at the forefront of resistance to colonial rule.

The Algerian Jean Sénac (1926-1973) was one of the most prolific and articulate of North African poets, writing politically inspired poems ('Dawn Song of My People', 'The July Massacres'. In 'News in Brief' Sénac writes: 'Bidonvilles bidonvilles/ in the thistles anger/ builds its nest/ bidonville// One night a scream in the city/ freedom/ a thousand tigers lying in wait/ awake the stubborn foreheads…. Whose fault/ a man's/ accused of screaming/ accused of killing// It's but an abscess draining/ bidonvilles/ freedom// It's but an ear of wheat rising/ in the blood/ toward the good.' Sénac was assassinated. Murder of poets is an instrument of oppression around the world, carried out by dictatorial regimes and by religious fundamentalists alike. The first opposes any insurrection; the other all modernity.

Although Martinique-born, psychiatrist Franz Fanon (1925-1961) is better known as an Algerian, author of 'Wretched of the Earth', writing on the psychopathology of colonialism. In the excerpt from 'On National Culture' he severely criticises the "colonized intellectual" who instead of returning to some nostalgic prelapsarian past must use literary talents to galvanize the people who are oppressed *now*. A poet who responded to this call was Kateb Yacine (1929-1989), of Berber ancestry, who created a powerful Maghrebian vernacular literature for every medium.

The Fifth Diwan comes in two parts, both titled, 'Make It New: The Invention of Independence.' Authors are presented by country, dealing with colonial and post-colonial violence and oppression – the'poetry of responsibility'– up to and including the current 'Arab Revolution', which had its start in Tunisia. (Between the sections are works by notional exiles such as Paul Bowles, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Berque.)

Many of the poets risked or lost their lives in speaking truth to power. Tahar Bekri defied the oppressors: 'All these leaves that fall to the tyranny/ Of winter don't prevent the bird from perching// On the branches free and invincible/ His song fed on snow and sun'. Moncef Mezghanni excoriated poets who toady up to the regime, seduced by golden pens and silver inkwells, 'and finally a pile of paper money'. The mother of one such poet interrupts his public reading by shouting 'With a duck's feather/ he used to write poems of gold,/ but with a golden pen/ he has only written/ a duck's speech'.

Abdelkrim Tabbal expresses with bitter irony the dreadful risk to a poet writing under a viciously oppressive regime: 'We sit down around a table in the café/ and suddenly the café is a tomb/ We sip the small glass of coffee, the coffee is blood/ We watch the waiter, he is a torturer/ We look at the spoon stuck in the glass/ the spoon is a mic' ('Happiness'). The splendid work of Abdellatif Laâbi, has just now been brought into English with recent translations by André Naffis-Sahely. Laâbi is a pioneer of Maghrebian poetry, a founder of the avant-garde journal (Souffles). His efforts and art cost him eight years in prison. We were privileged to meet and hear him at The Mosaic Rooms in Earl's Court this earlier this year, with sponsorship by the Poetry Translation Centre.

Abdelmajid Benjelloun writes aphoristically. 'If you want to know how Arabs love, watch them listening to Oum Koultoum' ('The Flute of Origins, Or the Taciturn Dance'). Mohammed Bennis reminds one of Wallace Stevens in 'Seven Birds'; six with different colours, the last 'colourless' but most compellingly: 'Where light unites with vibration/ A draft that startles/ Its visitor with a wing whose recurrent glitter/ Is ever-changing and I can see it from a distance'.

More women are now writing and being published who represent the lyric tradition. They should become equally well known. Among others: Ouidad Benmoussa ('I am created by a kiss/ For me to dwell in you/ No ocean in my eyes/ But waves/ No spring in my hands but sound'.); Touria Majdouline ('Your silence is exhausting/ The choke became heavier/ The bridge – to you – longer/ So may I leave/ Or can you spare/ Some time for speech?'); Waafa Lamrani ('In the morning/ at the hour when birds head in the direction of the ocean/ disarray takes me in the form/ of startled happiness'); Rashida Madani ('We never drew up a pact with the desert/ we set loose hostile camels there/ near the outlines of false cities/ constructed on mirages').

From Libya comes our colleague living in Michigan, Khaled Mattawa, writing world poetry in Arabic and English, and providing translation of fellow Arab poets, such as Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish. He inspires other bilingual writers, such as Fady Joudah, to bring Arab poets to our attention.

The poetic styles displayed here are resolutely modern, seldom ironic or confessional, but still drawing on centuries-old antecedents. Anaphorae and declamations abound, forms of chanting true to the ancient oral tradition. The lines are short, often one or two words long, which evokes the way traditional Arab poets shouted out to applause at each line. Extreme metaphors are commonly used, such as Ashur Etwebi's 'vagabond clouds have picked your apple and the song has lost its virginity…the pomegranate of the soul leans over my body' ('Of Solitude and a Few Other Matters'). It is a trope promulgated by the Syrian poet Adonis, and Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish, where the more distant the relation between two disparate subjects (tenor and vehicle), the better. One obstacle for 'western' readers' full appreciation is that the works employ such ancient and honoured imagery: camels, oases, desert, sea, open sky and horizon, birds of prey, the sufi mystical tradition and ecstasy; and the special eroticism that comes in a conservative society as typified by the *qasida* love poem: the absence of the loved one from a deserted campground.

In a representative anthology such as this, only one or a brief sample of works per writer is given, and some just in fragments; it is like a huge buffet of *mezze*, to be indulged in slowly to avoid satiation. It is, however, necessary for its introduction to the Anglophone world. The editors' commentaries are useful in explaining the biographic details, as well as the social and political context, but seldom serve well as critiques of the works themselves. And since none supplied, the reader should consult a detailed map of the region to identify the places the poets come from.

One hopes that the series ‘Poems for the Millennium’ continues, and brings us the riches of another part of the world yet less revealed.

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