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Poetisation of the metropolis

Kitab al-Mudun/Le livre des villes, Adonis, Original silk-screen prints and drawings by Ziad Dalloul, translated from the Arabic by Anne Wade Minkowski and Jacques Berque, Paris: La Teinturerie, galerie/Editions UNESCO, 1999. pp393

This beautiful bilingual edition of poems by Adonis includes 190 pages of the Arabic original poems by the Syrian poet, 'Ali Ahmad Sa'id, known by his pen name, Adonis, 205 pages of French translations, and 18 different drawings by the Syrian artist Ziad Dalloul; each drawing corresponds to one of the nine poems in Arabic and the nine French renderings of them. The book has been printed in a limited edition of 600 copies. The first hundred were printed on laid paper, with nine engravings on wove paper, enclosed in cloth-mounted cases. The other 500 copies were illustrated with drawings and accompanied by one of the five original silk-screen prints, each having a number between one and 100. My copy is number 42, which is the print corresponding to the Cairo poem. In its abstract composition I can detect a pyramid, though Dalloul has insisted that he deliberately avoided touristic emblems.

The book is clearly a printing feat: it was published in late October 1999 with the financial support of the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, and a copy of the encased book was deposited in the rare book section of the Bibliothèque nationale. The book is more than a collector's item, however. It is an awe-inspiring object of art and poetry that invites something other than coffee-table display. One is inclined to set it on one of those lecterns where normally an authoritative text is placed. I, for one, found myself washing my hands every time I was about to open this formidable book, and felt the need to shed the contamination of daily dress before entering into its poetic and artistic universe. Including the term *kitab/livre/book/biblia* (as opposed to *divan*, for example) in its title reinforces the venerational connotations associated with the term in Arabic as well as European languages. My response to it probably resembles the way medievalists felt when reading manuscripts.

The nine poems revolving around cities in the Arab World, Europe and America were written at different times and are arranged in this book in the following, somewhat puzzling, order: 1. "Au sein d'un alphabet second" 1993 (Damascus); 2. "La main de la pierre dessine le lieu" 1991-2 (Petra); 3. "Cheminement du désir dans la géographie de la matière" 1987 (Paris); 4. "Berceau" 1983 (Sana'a); 5. "Tombeau pour New York" 1971 (New York City); 6.

"Le temps" 1982 (Beirut); 7. "Marrakech/Fès: L'espace tisse l'interprétation" 1979 (Marrakesh and Fez); 8. "Douze lanternes pour Grenade" undated (Granada); 9. "Le corps du soleil" 1988 (Cairo). Apart from the poem entitled "Berceau" (Cradle) which was translated by Jacques Berque, all the other poems were translated by Anne W. Minkowski with the collaboration of the poet. She also prepared the glossary of Arabic proper names and words in the French text.

This book offers the pleasures of lyricism and refinement to Francophone and Arabophone poetry lovers, but it is captivating for the bilingual reader and the translator. My own strategy of reading was to read the poem in Arabic and then read the French translation of that poem. As I would read the Arabic and be seized by a particularly striking image or verse line, I would turn to the French to see how the translator had coped. Sometimes when reading the French, I would come across a specifically French way of saying something; I would then turn to the Arabic to see the parallel.



The drawings by the Syrian artist Ziad Dalloul corresponding to the Cairo poem

Two telling examples here should suffice. When I read "... dé qui abolira le hazard" (die that will abolish chance) in the Petra poem, I could not help but see in it the inversion of the nineteenth-century French poet Stéphane Mallarmé's famous poem "Un coup de dé jamais n'abolira le hazard", and somehow I did not recall the Mallarmean echo in the original, so I went back to check, only to find that Adonis has used *nard sa'ib* (winning dice). I was impressed by Minkowski's poetic competence in finding the right parallel though not the right equivalent.

However I was less convinced by her choice when I came across the word *merde* (shit) in the seventh poem. Though you may find such words in the poetry of the new generation of Arab poets intent on challenging taboos, Adonis is consistent in using refined language even though he also questions obstacles to freedom of expression. The Arabic original in the poem is *ouff* -- an interjection that indicates having had enough of something awful (in this case "the third Arab epoch").

French in fact is rich with interjections that depict disgust and loss of patience, not least of them *zut!* (ugh!), which I believe would have been more appropriate to the spirit of Adonis and to his poetics. This is particularly so, as *zut* is considered to be a euphemism for *merde* and has been used in literary contexts by the French Symbolists including Huysmans and Rimbaud. The translator could also have used an italicized transliteration of the Arabic word as an alternative, and then explained it in the Glossary. But all in all, the translators render

Adonis faithfully and elegantly. Nevertheless, with a book of this calibre typographical and punctuational errors, though only a few, are an impediment (for example, what should have been *chamelle* [she-camel] for the Arabic *naqa* reads as *chandelle* [candle]).

The nine poems cover more than nine cities; each one does not simply recall one metropolis, but also other cities for example by juxtaposition and parallelism, or by ironic contrast or nostalgic longing. The poetic landscape of these cities includes memorable squares, streets, cafés, neighbourhoods, *souks*, rivers, palaces, mosques, saints' shrines, as well as human figures associated with them both in the present and the past. This combination of physical and human geography points the reader to the architecture and the culture of the cities: In Granada, Alhambra and the Sierra Nevada as well as Lorca and Armando Palacio Valdés; in New York, Harlem, Broadway, Lincoln Center and Whitman; in Paris the Café Les Deux Magots, the Marquis de Sade and Jean Genet; in Cairo the Café Fishawi in Sayyidna al-Hussein and a galaxy of literary figures including Ghitani, Matar, Kafrawi, Ramadan and I'tidal (Osman).

Each poem runs into several tableaux, and each tableau makes visual and semantic use of different fonts and layout. Metaphorically speaking, bifocal -- if not multifocal -- lenses are thus necessary to read and comprehend the complexity of the poetic scene depicted. This effort to dazzle with the different registers of writing and stylistics, of correspondence and crisscrossing, provokes the reader. It contributes to the decentring of the poetic page, and it challenges our reading practice of moving along regular tracks. This complex and somewhat disturbing layout has something to do with the city as rich yet labyrinthical, multifaceted yet uncharted. An individual in a city has to create his or her network of relations and cannot depend on sliding into traditional structures and kin categories as in the countryside. Making sense of the text likewise requires a certain willingness to explore and to enter into the adventurous activity of interpretation.

The attitude of Adonis to the metropolis is ambivalent. He sees the possibilities the city offers its residents, but he is also aware of what it takes away from them. In his chosen exile in Paris, Adonis conjures up his village:

"mais je ne rappelle pas avoir vu une seule étoile danser, lire ou marcher comme les étoiles de mon enfance/J'ai dû m'imaginer les étoiles de qassabine pour me repérer,/tandis que je flânais de par les rues,/écoutant la plainte des hommes, fleuve sans embouchure, déferler autour de la seine"

(I can't recall having seen a single star dance, read or walk like the stars of my childhood/I had to imagine the stars of Qassabine to find my way/as I roamed the streets/listening to the moans of people resounding around the Seine, a river without a mouth [an outlet]).

In this particular case, but not in the other poems, the translator Minkowski has chosen not to capitalize proper names such as Qassabine, the poet's village in Syria, and Seine the French river, probably to match the Arabic with its absence of the upper case.

The city as a symbol and metaphor in Adonis's poetry has its gloomy side. With the loneliness in the city of light, the grave the poet finds fit for New York, the imagery of the city of the dead in Cairo, the depiction of the dead and archaeological city of Petra in

Jordan, the metropolis connotes a place of shades, a sort of carnivalistic underworld. And yet, as Abdo Wazen has pointed out in a review article, the attitude of Adonis *vis-à-vis* the city is radically different from that of poets who migrated from provincial towns to the capital and found in the metropolis a cruel prison house, something that Hijazi and Sayyab exemplified in their poetry, for example.

What is the attraction of the city then for Adonis? In my reading, it is this dissonance of the city, this assault on the univocal that the poet celebrates. He puts up with the metropolis, suffocating as it may be, distant from the first sky as it may be, because it allows paradox and contradiction, thus triggering creativity. Adonis is no romantic poet singing the praise of the folk and the beauty of the rural. His own trajectory from Qassabine to Beirut to Paris is predicated on his loyalty first and foremost to the creative fount within him. Uprooting a poet whether from his village or from his world is putting him face to face with otherness. It is precisely this challenge to his comfortable and static identity that moves the poet to create. "Créer, c'est métisser" (to create is to hybridise) in the words of Adonis, and what better matrix for such *métissage* than the metropolis?

Reviewed by **Ferial J Ghazoul**

A Grave for New York

By Adonis

Between Harlem and Lincoln Center

I, a vagrant number, advance in a desert covered by the teeth of a black dawn. No snow, no wind. I was like someone following a phantom (the face is not a face but a wound, or tears, the body merely a pressed rose), a phantom (would you say a woman? Or a man? Or a woman-man?) carrying bows and arrows in its breast and ready to pounce on an empty space.

A gazelle passed by and he called it earth, a bird appeared and he called it the moon. And I knew that he was hurrying to see the rebirth of the Red Indian . . . in Palestine and her sisters,

Space is a ribbon of bullets,

The earth is a screen of corpses

I felt that I was an atom undulating in a mass, undulating toward the horizon the horizon the horizon. I came down into parallel valleys that stretch away into infinite distance, and I even began to doubt that the earth was round

I put New York in brackets and walked in a parallel city. My feet had their fill of streets and the sky was a lake in which swam fishes of the eye and the mind, and animals of the clouds. The *Hudson* was fluttering like a crow dressed in the body of a nightingale. The dawn came toward me like a child sighing and pointing to its wounds. I called the night but it gave no answer. It carried its bed and surrendered to the sidewalk.

Then I saw it covering itself with the most tender wind -- a wind so

tender, nothing surpassed its tenderness except the walls and columns . .
. A cry, two, three . . . and *New York* flinched like a half-frozen frog
jumping into a waterless pond.

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Jayyusi. Poem translated by Lena Jayyusi and Alan Brownjohn.

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