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"ADONIS: SELECTED POEMS" BY ADONIS;
TRANSLATED BY KHALED MATTAWA

Adonis
Selected Poems

TRANSLATED FROM THE ARABIC BY
KHALED MATTAWA

Yale UNIVERSITY PRESS ■ NEW HAVEN & LONDON

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"ADONIS: SELECTED POEMS" BY ADONIS;
TRANSLATED BY KHALED MATTAWA

Frontispiece: Poem and calligraphy by Adonis.
Translated by Bassam Frangieh.

Live and be radiant
Create a poem
and go away.
Increase
The expanse of the earth.

The Margellos World Republic of Letters is dedicated to making literary works from around the globe available in English through translation. It brings to the English-speaking world the work of leading poets, novelists, essayists, philosophers, and playwrights from Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East to stimulate international discourse and creative exchange.

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INTRODUCTION

A culturally literate person in the Arab world today would find it difficult to recall when he or she first heard of Adonis. By the time one is old enough to drop the names of poets in casual conversation, Adonis is already there among the classical poets ‘Antara, Imruulqais, Abu Nawwas, and al-Mutannabi, and certainly among the modern pioneers Ahmad Shawqi, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Nizar Qabbai, and Mahmoud Darwish. Later, while browsing the shelves of contemporary literature, one would find copies of Adonis’s single volumes of poetry and multi-volume collections occupying sizable space in the poetry section. Eventually, when studying twentieth-century Arab literature, one would discover that Adonis is one of the most original voices in Arabic verse and an indispensable contributor to Arabic criticism. The young lover of literature will pause at the name. What sort of name is Adonis? It is the Greek name of Tammuz, a deity worshipped in the Levant and Mesopotamia prior to the Jews’ arrival in Canaan and whose memory was celebrated well into the golden age of Islam. Here the enigma behind the poet’s name and his poetry begins to develop—Adonis turns out to be more deeply rooted in the history of the region than its current inhabitants realize.

Born to a modest Alawite farming family in January 1930, Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said Esber) hails from the village of Qassabin near the city of Latakia in western Syria. He was unable to afford formal schooling for most of his childhood, and his early education consisted of learning the Quran in the local *kuttab* (mosque-affiliated school) and memorizing classical Arabic poetry, to which his father had introduced him. In 1944, despite the animosity of the village chief and his father’s reluctance, the young poet managed to recite one of his poems before Shukri al-Quwatli, the president of the newly established Republic of Syria, who was on a visit to Qassabin. After admiring the boy’s verses, al-Quwatli asked him if there were anything he needed help with. “I want to go to school,” responded the young poet, and his wish was soon fulfilled in the form of a scholarship to the French lycée at Tartus, from which he graduated in 1950. He was a good student, and he managed to secure a government scholarship to Damascus University, from which he

graduated with a degree in philosophy in 1954. (He would earn a doctoral degree in Arabic literature in 1973 from St. Joseph University in Beirut.)

While serving in the military in 1955–56, Adonis was imprisoned for his membership in the Syrian National Socialist Party. Led by the learned and sophisticated Antun Saadah, the SNSP had opposed European colonization of Greater Syria and its partition into smaller nations. The party advocated a secular, national (not strictly Arab) approach toward transforming Greater Syria into a progressive society governed by consensus and providing equal rights to all, regardless of ethnicity or sect. These ideals, along with the willingness of SNSP's members to confront authority, had impressed the poet while he was still in high school. After being released from prison in 1956, Adonis and his bride, the critic Khalida Said, settled in Beirut and quickly became Lebanese nationals.

There Adonis joined ranks with Yusuf al-Khal in editing *Shi'r* (Poetry) magazine, an innovative Arabic literary journal that was published for ten years and was arguably the most influential Arab literary journal ever. Al-Khal had invited the poet to join him at *Shi'r* after reading one of Adonis's poems while living in New York. In 1960, as Adonis prepared to move to Paris to study on a one-year scholarship, he resigned from the SNSP, convinced that he was not party material. He has not joined a political party since. In Paris he began to translate French poetry and drama, especially the works of Saint-John Perse and Georges Schehade. When he returned to Beirut he resumed his pioneering work with *Shi'r*. From 1970 to 1985 he taught Arabic literature at the Lebanese University; he also has taught at the University of Damascus, the Sorbonne (Paris III), and, in the United States, at Georgetown and Princeton universities. In 1985 he moved with his wife and two daughters to Paris, which has remained their primary residence.

Adonis's publications include twenty volumes of poetry and thirteen of criticism. His dozen books of translation to Arabic include the poetry of Perse and Yves Bonnefoy, and the first complete Arabic translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2002). His multi-volume anthology of Arabic poetry (*Diwan al-shi'r al-'arabi*), covering almost two millennia of verse, has been in print since its publication in 1964. He has edited several volumes of the works of the most influential writers of Arab modernity, from Yusuf al-Khal to Muhammad Abdulwahab. Adonis's awards include the International Poetry Forum Award (Pittsburgh, 1971), National Poetry Prize (Lebanon, 1974), Grand Prix des Biennales Internationales de la Poésie (Belgium, 1986), Prix de Poésie Jean Malrieu Étranger (France,

1991), Prix de la Méditerranée (France, 1994), Nazim Hikmet Prize (Turkey, 1994), Lerici-Pea Prize (Italy, 2000), Oweiss Cultural Prize (UAE, 2004), and the Bjørnson Prize (Norway, 2007). In 1997 the French government named him *Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*.

Adonis's literary education, guided by his father, was steeped in ancient Arab literature, especially the poetry of the Sufis, whose verses inflamed his imagination with its mystery and explorations of the inner life. Adonis's most noted early efforts had come while he was also under the influence of poets such as Gibran Kahlil Gibran, Ilyas Abu Shabaka, Sa'id 'Aql, and Salah Labaki, all poets who broke from traditional Arabic poetry in tone, subject matter, and prosody. Responding to post-independence disillusionment, the loss of Palestine, or the Nakba of 1948, and the slow rate of social and political progress, Adonis's early poetry attempted to voice his political and social beliefs and to contribute to efforts aimed at pushing Arab culture into modernity. Even at that early age Adonis was merging the classical tradition with the new poetic modes.

By the time he was released from prison and exiled to Lebanon in 1956, the name Adonis—which the poet had adopted during his late teens in response to newspaper editors who rejected his work—had become familiar to readers in Damascus. Later in Beirut, while at *Shi'r*, Adonis wrote many of the magazine's well-articulated and energetic editorials, and he played an important role in the evolution of free verse in Arabic.

Adonis and al-Khal asserted that modern verse needed to go beyond the experimentation of *al-shi'r al-hadith* (modern, or free, verse), which had appeared nearly two decades earlier. The *Shi'r* school advocated a poetry that did away with traditional expressions of sentiment and abandoned metrical or formal restrictions. It advocated a renewal of language through a greater acceptance of contemporary spoken Arabic, seeing it as a way to free Arabic poetry from its attachment to classical diction and the archaic subject matter that such language seemed to dictate.

Also responding to a growing mandate that poetry and literature be committed to the immediate political needs of the Arab nation and the masses, Adonis and *Shi'r* energetically opposed the recruitment of poets and writers into propagandistic efforts. In rejecting *Adab al-iltizam* (politically committed literature), Adonis was opposing the suppression of the individual's imagination and voice for the needs of the group. Poetry, he

argued, must remain a realm in which language and ideas are examined, reshaped, and refined, in which the poet refuses to descend to the level of daily expediencies. Emerging as one of the most eloquent practitioners and defenders of this approach, Adonis wrote that the poet is a "metaphysical being who penetrates to the depths" and, in so doing, "keeps solidarity with others." Poetry's function is to convey eternal human anxieties. It is the exploration of an individual's metaphysical sensitivity, not a collective political or socially oriented vision.

After leaving *Shi'r* in 1967, and as he prepared to launch *Mawaqif*, a new literary journal, Adonis continued to develop his critique of Arabic poetry and culture. In his 1973 two-volume analysis of Arabic literature, *Al-Thabit wa al-mutahawil* (The fixed and the changing), Adonis theorizes that two main streams have operated within Arabic poetry, a conservative one and an innovative one. The history of Arabic poetry, he argues, has been that of the conservative vision of literature and society (*al-thabit*), quelling poetic experimentation and philosophical and religious ideas (*al-mutahawil*). *Al-thabit*, or static current, manifests itself in the triumph of *naql* (conveyance) over *'aql* (original, independent thought); in the attempt to make literature a servant of religion; and in the reverence accorded to the past whereby language and poetics were essentially Quranic in their source and therefore not subject to change.

The dynamic, *mutahawil*, current has historically supported rational interpretation of religious texts, emphasizing the connotative over the literal (here Adonis cites the Mu'tazala, Batini, and Sufi religious movements as the persecuted champions of this approach). The literature of the *mutahawil* current had repeatedly emphasized poetry's esthetic and conceptual impact rather than its moralizing functions, where reliance on fidelity to life and experience as perceived by the individual, rather than on conformity to social standards, is the source of poetic creation.

The shift from *naql* to *'aql* meant that poetry now would be aimed at "embarking upon the unknown, not upon the known." Furthermore, Adonis wrote, "the poet does not transmit in his poetry clear or ready-made thoughts as was the case with much of classical poetry. Instead, he sets his words as traps or nets to catch an unknown world." This kind of open-endedness affects both the poet and the reader. In constructing a world of new words and images the poet has to structure an artistic unit that satisfies his

sensibility. In essence, the poet begins using the new language and its imagery until he creates a world he can inhabit.

As for the reader, the ambiguities and indeterminacies in this kind of art (inevitable because of its newness) lead him or her to actively engage in creating mental perceptions of similar innovativeness. The lack of clarity forces the reader to rely not on the writer or the text but solely on his or her mind. For Adonis, who here is as much drawing on the complex esthetics of Abu Tammam as he is referencing Mallarmé, it is this kind of interaction with art, supplemented with unlimited creativity in composition and perception, that Arab culture needs to truly evolve. He argues that a revolution in the arts and in how they are received can generate imaginative strategies at all levels of society. Arabic poetry, he believes, has the responsibility of igniting this mental overhaul in Arab culture. It should not be used to advocate political policies that do not touch the root of Arab cultural stagnation.

Adonis's critique of Arab culture did not merely call for the adoption of Western values, paradigms, and lifestyles per se. Science, which has evolved greatly in Western societies, with its "intuitions and practical results," should be acknowledged as the "most revolutionary development in the history of mankind," argues Adonis. The truths that science offers "are not like those of philosophy or of the arts. They are truths which everyone must of necessity accept, because they are proven in theory and practice." But science is guided by dynamics that make it insufficient as an instrument for human fulfillment and meaning: science's reliance on transcending the past to achieve greater progress is not applicable to all facets of human activity. "What does progress mean in poetry?" asks Adonis. "Nothing." Progress in the scientific sense pursues the apprehension of phenomenon, seeking uniformity, predictability, and repeatability. As such, the idea of progress in science is "quite separate from artistic achievement." Poetry and the other arts seek a kind of progress that affirms difference, elation, movement, and variety in life.

Adonis states that in studying legends and myths, seeking the mystical and the obscure, he found sources that "reveal truths which are more sublime and which concern humanity in a more profound way than scientific truths" precisely because they engage areas that escape the grip of science and rationalism. And thus convinced that rigor and

depth—in terms of our knowledge of our psyches and our understanding of our human existence—do not follow the future-oriented outlook of science, Adonis has stressed that progress and modernity in the arts do not follow the chronological order of scientific progress, where greater acquisition of material knowledge often results in human actions or arrangements that contradict humane and progressive thinking. Providing examples of periods of progressive thinking and esthetics in Arab culture, Adonis argues that the “essence of progress is human, that is[,] qualitative not quantitative. . . . Progress is not represented merely by economic and social renewal, but more fundamentally by the liberation of man himself, and the liberation of the suppressed elements beneath and beyond the socioeconomic.” Adonis understands progress and modernity as neither linear nor cyclical but episodic, occurring during times when the human mind and imagination are in a dynamic and harmonious relationship with physical needs and concerns.

In this regard, modernity has occurred and can occur anywhere, in the past as well as in the future. Human achievements should not be seen as exclusive to their cultures of origin, for many are among the global attributes of civilization, developments that we have naturally adapted from each other throughout our existence on earth. And while progress emerges from addressing the contradictions and hindrances in a given setting, all human societies can benefit from others’ experiences and developments. This is evidenced by our shared instinctive desire to live in physical security and to seek meaningful lives. At one point, Arab civilization was best suited to offer this contribution to the rest of humanity, and the West gravitated toward it for all sorts of knowledge and science, just as many Easterners are now gravitating toward the West. Although the products of progressive thinking and renewal can be shared, the onset of renewal in any given society can arise only from a response to the contradictions at hand.

Adonis insists that newness in Arab society and subsequently in Arabic poetry, “however unequivocal its formal break with the past may appear,” must be “identifiably Arabic in character. . . . It cannot be understood or evaluated within the context of French or English modernism, or according to their criteria, but must be seen in the context of Arab creativity and judged by the standards of artistic innovation particular to Arabic.” The poet therefore needs to be grounded in the organic artistic process that is his native poetry. His expansion of the horizon of human thought and feeling rely in part on the

innovations he makes on his medium and his language, where work on their particular facets is the way to expand knowledge in the broadest sense.

Even while viewing Western conceptual innovations with a sense of entitlement, and considering them human cultural advancements, Adonis nonetheless has been a consistent critic of Western societies' and governments' treatment of the rest of humanity. The fiercely anti-totalitarian Adonis has repeatedly asserted that Western weaponry, industry, and capital have dehumanized both Westerners and those subject to their violence and greed. His critique of the damaging effects of mechanization and the "mongrelizing" force of globalization have become increasingly acerbic in the last two decades, coinciding with his relocation to Paris in 1985.

Adonis's visits to Arab capitals, where he is often asked to lecture on the state of Arab culture, have often caused controversies. To young Arab poets who have adopted free verse, which he has long advocated, he says that their work is only superficially modern, as its outlook is often trapped in convention. And, causing controversy among wider cultural spheres, he has regularly declared the end of the Arab culture, and the Arabs themselves. Noting that little cultural innovation, let alone science or technology, is being created in the Arab world, Adonis has harangued Arab audiences in public and in media interviews, accusing them of being mere importers of cultural goods and esthetic styles. Much of Arab music, classical or popular, either reiterates traditional forms or parrots Western styles, he says, and the same goes for most drama, cinema, literature, and visual arts produced in Arab countries. Tinged with a desire to provoke Arab artists and intellectuals to challenge the increasing entrenchment of their societies, Adonis's tone of late never fails to convey a sense of disappointment. He has remained, however, deeply engaged in the affairs of the region and has lent his support to developments that gave him a sense of hope. Feisty, contentious, articulate, and alert throughout his sixty years in public life, Adonis is a well-decorated cultural figure who has refused to rest on his considerable laurels.

Although he is a seasoned and controversial public intellectual declaiming on the state of his society and the world at large, Adonis is first and foremost a poet. And as much as his literary criticism has solidified his role within modern Arabic letters, it is his startling poetry that continues to endow his ambitious esthetic vision. The first two books

he published, *First Poems* (Qassa'id ula), 1957, and *Leaves in the Wind* (Awraq fi al-reeh), 1960, presented a well-honed poetic sensibility of great promise, poems in which he resuscitated the tradition of the *qit'a* (poetic fragment). For a long time Arabic poetry has been identified with the classical *qassida*, the odelike lyric-epic in which the poet's biography frames the poem's character and reception. Adonis's early works, represented here with selections from *First Poems*, focus on the poem's voice, directed by related sentiments or events, and in so doing emphasize the poetry at the expense of the poet. It should be noted that Adonis, true to his artistic instincts, never quite adhered to the seemingly programmatic aspects of his vision for Arabic poetry—such as his advocacy of the use of dialect. His language is of a high literary caliber, his diction richer than that of any of his avant-garde peers.

With his third book, *The Songs of Mihyar of Damascus* (Ughniyat Mihyar al-Dimashqi), 1961, Adonis established himself as a unique voice in modern Arabic poetry. Through the persona of the Mihyar, Adonis articulates a vision of the world empowered by revolutionary fervor and mysticism fused with symbolist elements associated with twentieth-century French poetry. The volume also mingles Judeo-Christian-Islamic heritage with Greco-Roman mythology; Mihyar is identified at times explicitly with various figures, including Noah and Adam, and Ulysses and Orpheus. Through this persona, states Adonis, "I wanted to get out of the direct subjective discourse and speak an impersonal language, objective-historical and personal, symbolic, and mythic at the same time. So it is more than a mask; it is a vortex where Arab culture would meet with all its dimensions in the central and pivotal cause: crossing from the old Arab world into the new." In Adonis's words we hear allusions to two cornerstones of Anglo-American modernism: "Vortex" is what Ezra Pound called any dynamic cultural initiative in which an artist moves in a given direction but attempts to survey and affect his or her surroundings. We also hear in Adonis's description of Mihyar an echo of Eliot's "objective correlative," a phrase that encapsulates Eliot's understanding of the French symbolist approach to poetic representation.

Adonis's next volume, *Migrations and Transformations in the Regions of Night and Day* (Kitab al-Tahwulat wa al-Hijra fi Aqalim al-Nahar wa al-lail), 1965, reconstructs the turmoil surrounding the life and legend of Abdulrahman al-Dakhil (731–788 A.D.), the last heir of the Umayyad dynasty, who fled Damascus as the 'Abbasids took control of the

caliphate. Al-Dakhil, a figure whose story symbolized youth, betrayal, and people's natural sympathy for the persecuted, traveled westward until he reached Andalusia, where he established an alternate dynastic caliphate and launched one of Islam's most celebrated ages. In both *Mihyar* and *Migrations and Transformations*, Adonis demonstrates mastery of epic scope and lyrical precision. Each of the poems in these two volumes stands on its own while adding a layer to the complex dilemmas facing their speakers. And while *Mihyar* is a synthetic figure drawn from the region's history and al-Dakhil is based on a specific person, neither of these books renders a narrative as such, both ably demonstrating Adonis's stated preference for circling his subject matter. *Mihyar* threads through the existential crises of Arab life in the twentieth century and al-Dakhil processes the Arab world's political and cultural crises through the prism of one of its most tumultuous eras. In both books Adonis finds a balance between poetry's sociopolitical role and the demands of the symbolic "language of absence" that poetry required—as he saw it, a language that allowed poetry to focus on perennial points of tension and to endure beyond its occasions.

In *Mihyar* and *Migrations* we find solitude and imagination emerging as powerful forces, uniting within the speaker's mind and lifting him to ecstasy, then separating and forcing him to pit them against each other in order to reunite them. Imagination, coupled with solitude, allows the speaker to witness the transformative capacities of nature, where language is the currency/blood of renewed paradigms. Nature begins to mimic our habits and wear our features, rooting us where we perpetually feel estranged. Without imagination—as in the poem "Adam," as *Mihyar* recounts the mythical figure's dilemma—solitude is liable to erase all knowledge of oneself. Alternately, the capacity to imagine saves al-Dakhil in his flight from his persecutors, and each encounter with the natural world erases an old longing, creating space for renewal. Similarly, *Mihyar*, who "is not a prophet/not a star," is nonetheless engaged in dismantling idolized paradigms one by one, replacing them with new discoveries. He embraces the earth by "crawling under rubble," trying to loosen her bond to gods and tyrants. *Mihyar* is a knight trying to rein in unfamiliar words in "the rough and magical . . . climate of new alphabets." Using irregular rhyme and employing the improvisations on traditional metrics that came to the fore two decades or so before the publication of these books, Adonis here provides

musical pleasure without predictability. The subtle musical elements call attention to the language, keeping the reader engaged, but not so enchanted as to be lulled by the music.

In the 1970s, Adonis turned his attention to the long-form poem, producing two of the most original Arabic poetic works of the twentieth century. The first of these volumes, *This Is My Name* (Hadha Huwa Ismi), was first published in 1970 with only two long poems, then reissued two years later with an additional poem, "A Grave for New York." In the poem "This Is My Name," Adonis, spurred by the Arabs' shock and bewilderment after the Six-Day War, renders a claustrophobic yet seemingly infinite apocalypse. Here Adonis is hard at work undermining the social discourse that has turned catastrophe into a firmer bond with dogma and cynical defeatism throughout the Arab world. To mark this ubiquitous malaise, the poet attempts to find a language that matches it, and he fashions a vocal arrangement that swerves and beguiles. Thoughts in "This Is My Name" are so fractured, and loyalty and belief in the collective so fragile, that objects attempt to lure verbs from their subjects to save them from falling into escapist forms of narcissism or black holes of grief. Truthful in its fluidity, the language Adonis employs remains close to nerve endings and refuses to entrust itself to established facts. "I can transform: Landmine of civilization—This is my name," states one of the poem's voices—it's impossible to say that we have a single speaker—declaring that he is a fuse of hope capable of doing away with all that has come before him.

The second long poem, *Singular in a Plural Form* (Mufrad bi Sighat al Jama'), 1975, is a four-hundred-page work. The same breadth of experimentation, linguistic play, and deconstructionist esthetics found in "This Is My Name" permeates the dynamics of erotic union and rupture found in "Body," one of the work's four movements. Wavering between languid serenity and animated joy and disappointment, and between deadpan sobriety and articulate yearning, the lovers in "Body" explore their union's every facet. Doing away with rhyme altogether and opting for syncopated rhythmic patterns and abrupt syntactical transitions, Adonis offers a revolutionary and anarchic flow reminiscent of Sufi poetry and literature. As in the great mystical works that are steeped in eroticism, such as the poetry of Rumi, al-Hallaj, and St. John of the Cross, Adonis's "Body" narrates not a story but the *ahwal* (conditions or states of the heart and soul and

the desire to uplift and enhance) of the lovers' struggle for a touch of bliss to dissipate their hefty awareness of mortality.

Adonis's poetry in the 1980s began with a return to the short lyric works exemplified in *The Book of Similarities and Beginnings* (Al-Mutabaqat wa al-Awa'il), 1980. Adonis's work here still carries the scent of a larger project. He is not, as he was in *Stage and Mirrors* (Al-Masrah wa al-Maraya), 1968, holding a convex mirror to current events. Instead, he returns to the beginnings of things, focusing on stages of life and states of mind, imagining a time when one might discern a divide between memory and consciousness, biography and philosophy, and even between innocence and experience. The thrill of these poems is in the crystalline focus that Adonis brings to each subject he addresses, demonstrating that his lyric touch is as powerful as his epic sweep.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 prompted *The Book of Siege* (Kitab al-Hissar), 1985. This work brings Adonis closest to what we might call documentation, and perhaps best demonstrates his oblique approach to narration, in which the lyric of disaster mixes with the prose of somber meditation. The book includes a variety of stunning pieces. "Desert" and "Persons" move in fast-paced montage, slowed by dramatic scenes reminiscent of grainy slow-motion footage with masterful psalm-like passages. The genre-defying "Candlelight" is unique even by Adonis's standards. And "The Child Running Inside Memory" is as pure a lyric as he has ever written. *The Book of Siege*, little known even among Arab readers, is perhaps one of the best war books ever written in Arabic.

Beginning in the late 1980s, Adonis became, at least in his lyric practice, more of a poet of place, as Kamal Abu Deeb notes. Accompanied by his poetic guides, Abu Tammam, al-Mutannabi, Niffari, and Abu al-'Ala al-Ma'ari, the poet travels, seeking zones of openness that parallel the inheritance of progressive and tolerant humanism that he has long championed. Also at this time Adonis began to coauthor books of manifestos with younger poets from other parts of the Arab world (from Morocco to Bahrain) and to collaborate with visual artists and musicians. Exile and the loss of Beirut were thus being replaced by a greater connection to other arts and artists. Adonis's writings in the last two decades demonstrate a deliberate reexploration of the lyric (as exemplified by numerous love poems) and an abandonment of poetry as a unified genre. This era, Adonis once declared, is now simply the age of writing.

In the meantime, Adonis was working on *Al-Kitab* (*The Book*), 1995–2003, a three-volume epic that adds up to almost two thousand pages. In *Al-Kitab*, the poet travels on land and through the history and politics of Arab societies, beginning immediately after the death of the prophet Muhammad and progressing through the ninth century, which he considers the most significant period of Arab history, an epoch to which he repeatedly alludes. *Al-Kitab* provides a large lyric-mural rather than an epic that attempts to render the political, cultural, and religious complexity of almost fifteen centuries of Arab civilization. The form that Adonis opted to use for *Al-Kitab* was inspired by cinema, where the reader/viewer can watch the screen, and where “you see past and present, and you watch a scene and listen to music.”

The poet’s guide on this land journey is al-Mutannabi (915–965 A.D.), the great poet who was as engaged in the machination of power as he was in being the best poet of his age. The pages of *Al-Kitab* are divided into several parts. One portion of the page relates the personal memory of al-Mutannabi, or what he remembers while walking alongside the poet through history. Another portion is devoted to the guide’s individual experience as the poet imagines it. The third, at the bottom of the page, establishes a connection between the two parts, or digresses from them. The book includes a series of homages to the numerous great Arab poets who were killed or exiled and continue to be canonically marginalized. “I was telling my readers that Arab history is more than a history of the sword, that there were also great men,” states Adonis. To complete *Al-Kitab* the poet had to read all of the classics of Arab history, making the project an “immense amount of work . . . a crazy undertaking,” one that makes it impossible to excerpt in a way that would demonstrate its encyclopedic range and lyrical and dramatic ambition.

After the dense engagement of *Al-Kitab*, Adonis seems to have felt a great sense of relief and a freedom to experiment. Between 2003 and 2008 he published five books, each a deliberate recalibration of the poet’s voice. In *Prophecy, O Blind One* (‘Tanaba’ Ayuha al-a‘ma), 2003, Adonis, who had been criticized for the lack of personal warmth in his poetry, presents perhaps his most autobiographical chronicles. Hearing Adonis speak in the present tense of our times, telling of his dizzying journeys from airport to airport, American readers may hear supersonic echoes of *Lunch Poems*, which chronicles Frank O’Hara’s exuberant midday jaunts through New York City. *Prophecy* also includes an atypical poem for Adonis, “Concerto for 11th/September/2001 B.C.” In this idiosyncratic

and incisive meditation on the violence unleashed on September 11, 2001, Adonis draws on a sizable segment of recorded human history to review what had become a singular event in our era. Here the poet reiterates and revises his impressions in "A Grave for New York," but not without a sense of anguish that little had changed since the earlier poem, and that little was likely to change in the future. A book published in the same year, *Beginnings of the Body, Ends of the Sea* (Awal al-Jassad, Akher al-Bahr), cross-pollinates two of Adonis's earlier styles, the erotic/mystical atmosphere of "Body" and the lyrical quickness of *The Book of Similarities and Beginnings*. The poems in *Beginnings of the Body* utilize sharp imagery, dialogue, and quiet musings within a formal consistency that unites them into a powerful meditation on love.

Among the more recent books is *Printer of the Planets' Books* (Warraq Yabi'u Kutub al-Nujum), 2008, which, with its leisurely prose meditations interspersed with lyrical flashes, draws on the poet's memories, especially his childhood in Qassabin. Tender and poised, these poems never veer into nostalgia or sentimentality. Adonis adroitly recaptures a child's sense of wonder, as well as his anguish and fears. Above all, perhaps, these poems capture the villagers' dignity, empowered by a naturally philosophical outlook and a practical resourcefulness that complement each other. The volume ends with a poem to poetry, or to the muse, who has visited him for years, always wearing the same black dress. Poetry has served the poet well in its all-consuming fashion, allowing him for decades "to fall asleep fatigued between the thighs of night" and to reinvent himself with every visit. But now he longs for a change; he wishes for poetry that would surprise him. The poem is a masterful end to the book and a brilliant subtle comment on the poet's vision of his future poetry and career.

Adonis's desire for renewal is not surprising. Looking at his oeuvre as presented here, we note the creativity and the great sense of liberty with which he went about inventing himself, in formal and prosodic aspects, and in tone and subject matter. We also note a great capacity for cunning, where creative impulses are embraced but are made to work hard for the poet's acceptance. Like al-Ma'ari before him, the poet maintained his skepticism of all forms of enthusiasm, and waited for his ideas to prove their mettle. Like Abu Tammam, who, when asked, "Why do you not write what is understood?" replied, "Why do you not understand what is written?" Adonis has entrusted language with the role of stretching our conceptual faculties while trusting the reader's natural ability to

occupy new realms of thought out of sheer curiosity. Finally, like al-Mutannabi, Adonis seems to have learned to speak with the full force of his art, having forged it with the heat of his doubt and creativity, and even his most ambiguous utterances exude clarity. Adonis is a poet who takes risks, but they are calculated ones taken when the stakes are truly high and requiring every ounce of the poet's creativity and intellect. Fortunately for readers of Arabic poetry, the rewards have never failed to bring them face to face with the sublime.

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A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

A few weeks ago I found a letter from Adonis in which he thanked me for translating two short poems by him that appeared in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Egypt's most widely distributed English-language newspaper. He also stated that he had no objection to my request to assemble and translate a selection of his more recent work. The letter was sent on April 13, 1992. At the time I contacted Adonis I had translated most of his *Celebrating Vague-Clear Things* and felt empowered to go on with more work. However, I soon realized that this work, with the particularity of its Arabic references, could not stand on its own in English without much of the poet's other work providing context. I also realized that to assemble a volume of more recent works I needed to work through at least twenty years of poetry. And, further, I had a ways to go before making any claims to being a poet myself. I could not bring myself to write the poet about my disappointing realizations, perhaps aware that he is accustomed to my kind of exuberant enthusiasm.

As I read more of Adonis's work over the years, in the original and in translation, I felt repeatedly that only a large selection of work could give a sense of the myriad stylistic transformations that he had brought to modern poetry at large, through his esthetic renderings of the cultural dilemmas confronting Arab societies in particular. Thirteen years after receiving his letter, and after completing several translation projects, I picked up Adonis's collected poems and began to translate, this time beginning with the earlier poems. I did not tell the poet that I was working on his poems, as I was still unsure that I'd do him justice. I vowed to contact him only when I had a substantial selection to offer. In 2006, when I was about to begin translating "This Is My Name," I was contacted by editors at Yale University Press who were interested in assembling the volume that I'd dreamed up way back in 1992. Furthermore, the editors said, Adonis had suggested that they contact me for the task. This was a chance that I did not want to miss.

Many questions arose as I began to contemplate the selection of work. Since a sizable representation of Adonis's early work had been translated lucidly and lyrically by Samuel Hazo and Abdullah al-Udhari, I intended to minimize retranslation, if only to increase

the total availability of the poet's work in English. Shawkat Toorwa's translation of *A Time Between Ashes and Roses* and Adnan Haydar's and Michael Beard's translation *Mihyar of Damascus: His Songs*—both from Adonis's early to middle period—necessitated that I forgo all anxieties about repeat translation and forge ahead, selecting what I perceived to be the best of the poet's work.

While keeping in mind a balance between his most critically acclaimed poetry with work that would show the continuum of his evolution as a poet, I also focused on what I could translate in a way that satisfied me as a reader of English verse. The matter of choosing was based on the English results, along with the goal of representing the majority of the poet's books. And so, with only a few exceptions, all of Adonis's seminal works are represented here. I hope that the arc of his development as a poet, and the continued broadening of that arc, are amply evident.

Avid readers in Arabic, however, will note that this selection includes no poems from Adonis's second book, *Leaves in the Wind* (*Awraq fi al-reeh*), 1960. This book falls between the first selection of poems (*First Poems*) and *Mihyar*, the poet's first significant early work, but does not seem to constitute a discernable development in the poet's unique voice. Readers also may question the absence of *Al-Kitab*, Adonis's three-volume, fifteen-hundred-page late work. *Al-Kitab*, as Adonis himself recently noted, "is very difficult to understand for someone without a very good grasp of Arab history." How to excerpt such a work in a decidedly limited space was, at first, a beguiling challenge. Eventually, however, I became convinced that no small sample of *Al-Kitab* would offer an adequate sense of the work's scope, and that the absence of the work is a better indicator of its magnitude than any reductive sampling of it would be.

The other gap is the exclusion of two of Adonis's books published in this decade. Here my choices were more decisive. None of the five books that Adonis had published between 2003 and 2008 can be seen as a separate development in his sixty years of poetry, despite the range of subject matter. Each of these books can be seen as a deliberate recalibration of the poet's voice, but to include them all would have overloaded the book and perhaps presented a lopsided image of the poet's development. I have chosen three books that demonstrate the breadth of Adonis's work and his voracious appetite for experimentation. *Printer of the Planets' Books*, firmly reminding us of the poet's roots and

his continued attachment to poetry, has an intimacy that helped round out this selection. In noting the stylistic and thematic variety of these late books combined, the reader will, I hope, see how open-ended and self-regenerative Adonis has been.

The language of modern Arabic poetry, especially when coupled with metrical elements, rings a few notches above middle diction. It can step into poetic or even archaic diction yet not seem to readers archaic or even too obviously allusive or overly self-conscious. Perhaps the last time English could do something akin to what Arabic poetry is doing today was in the hands of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, and Wallace Stevens, a language that believed in its alterity and trusted its formal bearing. But what American poet now can mimic Eliot and Crane and not sound derivative? American readers reading Adonis, especially in "This Is My Name," perhaps should try to imagine that his poetry has that formal high-modernist lilt.

As a translator and as a poet who only occasionally steps into formal diction, I felt that my own style and inclinations needed to be the base from which I would begin this project. I felt sure that as I translated more of Adonis's poetry I would grow with the poet and develop a harmonious accommodation of style, listening to the words I'd chosen and comparing them with the literal meaning of the originals and trying to weigh them emotionally to find the appropriate tone and cadence. In this process I was aided by recalling a conversation I had with Adonis in which we briefly talked about his own translation process. I had asked him about the critics who attacked his work. "These critics claimed that I erred in the literal sense," Adonis explained, "but I did not, I believe, make any poetic errors. That I could not allow myself to do." I took this advice as a vision for this translation project, the most difficult one of the nine I have undertaken.

I have been asked often about translation approaches and strategies but have become increasingly mystified about how to answer. In essence, I am not capable of describing the methodology of this translation project or any before it, as I believe it is impossible to determine a method of translating a work, particularly one of poetry. As my old teacher Willis Barnstone astutely notes, deciding on one approach to translating a work will only prove frustrating. Sooner rather than later, the translator will end up breaking any promises he has made about his method or process. And determining what one's approach had been after the project is complete is like trying to describe a long journey with a single

episode in it. In this regard I take it for granted that these translations of Adonis's poetry are neither literal nor so flexible as to stray from the literal content of the poem. The methods I have used to match fidelity with artistry are basically all the means I could muster.

Much of Adonis's early poetry makes frequent use of rhyme, but I have not tried to replicate his rhyming. The same can be said for meter. Given that Arabic metrical feet are quite different from Western ones, I have not stuck to any metrical pattern, even when the poems are metrically composed. All the poems as rendered in English are free verse but with an attention to rhythm, musicality, and compression that I hope will please both the eyes and ears of English-language poetry readers.

This project could not have taken place without the help and encouragement of several friends and fellow poets. I am grateful to Larry Goldstein, Elisa McCool, Jessica Young, Alana Di Riggi, Tung-Hui Hu, Catherine Calabro, Rasheeda Plenty, Sarah Schaff, Elizabeth Gramm, Lauren Proux, and Charlotte Boulay for their incisive feedback on several sections of the book. Thanks also to Suhail Eshdoud for his assistance with especially difficult phrases. I am grateful to Shawkat Toorwa, Adnan Haydar, Michael Beard, and Alan Hibbard for the suggestiveness of their translations, which have informed mine. Finally, I would like to thank Adonis for entrusting me with this task, for making his time available to me, and for granting me the freedom to rove among the splendors of his work to choose among them. I hope that he and those familiar with his work find this volume a fair and judicious representation of his work.

LOVE

The road and the house love me,
the living and the dead,
and a red clay jug at home
loved by water.

The neighbor loves me,
the field, threshing floor, and fire.

Toiling arms that better
the world, love me,

and go unrewarded with joy.

And tatters of my brother scattered about,
torn from his wilted chest
hidden by wheat spikes and season,
a carnelian from which blood shies.

He was the god of love as long as I lived.
What will love do if I too am gone?

SECRETS

Death holds us in its embrace,
reckless and modest,
carries us, a secret with his secrets
and turns our multitudes into one.

THE WOUND

1.

The leaves asleep under the wind
are the wounds' ship,
and the ages collapsed on top of each other
are the wound's glory,
and the trees rising out of our eyelashes
are the wound's lake.
The wound is to be found on bridges
where the grave lengthens
and patience goes on to no end
between the shores of our love and death.
The wound is a sign,
and the wound is a crossing too.

2.

To the language choked by tolling bells
I offer the voice of the wound.
To the stone coming from afar
to the dried-up world crumbling to dust
to the time ferried on creaky sleighs
I light up the fire of the wound.
And when history burns inside my clothes
and when blue nails grow inside my books,

I cry out to the day,
"Who are you, who tosses you
into my virgin land?"
And inside my book and on my virgin land
I stare into a pair of eyes made of dust.
I hear someone saying,
"I am the wound that is born
and grows as your history grows."

3.
I named you cloud,
wound of the parting dove.
I named you book and quill
and here I begin the dialogue
between me and the ancient tongue
in the islands of tomes
in the archipelago of the ancient fall.
And here I teach these words
to the wind and the palms,
O wound of the parting dove.

4.
If I had a harbor in the land
of dream and mirrors, if I had a ship,
if I had the remains
of a city, if I had a city
in the land of children and weeping,
I would have written all this down for the wound's sake,

34 *Songs of Mihyar of Damascus*

a song like a spear
that penetrates trees, stone, and sky,
soft like water
unbridled, startling like conquest.

5.

Rain down on our desert
O world adorned with dream and longing.
Pour down, and shake us, we, the palms of the wound,
tear out branches from trees that love the silence of the wound,
that lie awake staring at its pointed eyelashes and soft hands.

World adorned with dream and longing
world that falls on my brow
like the lash of a wound,
don't come close—the wound is closer—
don't tempt me—the wound is more beautiful.
That magic that your eyes had flung
on the last kingdoms—
the wound has passed over it,
passed and did not leave a single sail
to tempt toward salvation, did not leave
a single island behind.

SPELL

I see among the battered books
under the yellow dome
a punctured city flying.
I see walls made of silk sheets
and a murdered star
swimming in a green vessel.
I see a statue made of tears,
of the clay of limbs—and prostration
at the feet of a king.

"TALES OF A SEVERED HEAD" BY RACHIDA MADANI;
TRANSLATED BY MARILYN HACKER

Tales of a Severed Head

RACHIDA MADANI

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PREFACE

Marilyn Hacker

*There is no danger greater for the State than
that of self-styled intellectuals. You would have
been better off remaining illiterate.*

—King Hassan II of Morocco

Rachida Madani, Moroccan activist, teacher, Muslim feminist, painter—and, preeminently, writer—was born in Tangiers in 1951, and still lives there. She writes that, an early reader, she had already envisioned being a writer at the age of six, “so that everything that passed through my mind wouldn’t fall into oblivion.” She read everything she could put her hands on, “from comic books to astronomy” to the French children’s classics, and thus read all the works of the comtesse de Ségur before she was ten—a vision of an aristocratic, highly moralized European world of another century. She soon discovered poetry—the French Romantics first of all, whose work she tried to imitate at the age of twelve; then Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and the Surrealists. Later came Sartre and Beckett’s and Brecht’s theater. She cites the Nouveau Roman in French, the books of Claude Simon, Marguerite Duras, and Michel Butor, as the literary current that impressed her most strongly in its re-vision of narrative. Although a seismic change was renewing Arabic poetry in the 1960s and 1970s, Madani knew her other mother tongue through its classics only, and through daily speech in an entirely other register.

Madani was a schoolgirl in 1963 when King Hassan II ascended to the throne and instituted a policy of repression of political oppo-

nents, both nationalist and Communist, targeting intellectuals—writers, poets, historians—in particular. “There is no danger greater for the State than that of self-styled intellectuals. You would have been better off remaining illiterate,” the king proclaimed after a particularly brutal and bloody official response to a demonstration of workers, trade unionists, and students in 1965. He dissolved Parliament and assimilated its functions to the throne. The assassination of the exiled leftist leader Mehdi Ben Barka in Paris (with the collusion of the French police) followed several months later. This was the beginning of a period known to Moroccans as *les années de plomb* (the leaden years).

The repression was one reason for the emergence of a specifically Moroccan—and dissident—literature. New poets, fiction writers, and politically engaged songwriters and sociologists began to make their work public. Fatima Mernissi began to publish her groundbreaking semi-fictional, sometimes autobiographical studies of the lives of women in Morocco and in Islam. For the young Rachida Madani, it was the discovery of Francophone Maghrebin literature that gave her a focus for her own talent—the writing of the Algerian Kateb Yacine and the novelist Rachid Boudjedra—but especially her discovery of the specifically Moroccan magazine *Souffles* and the poets involved with it: the Surrealist Mohammed Khair-Eddine, who lived much of his short life in France, and the poet-activists Abdellatif Laâbi and Mostafa Nissabouri, all only a decade her seniors. The scholar Claude Reynaud has written that Moroccan poetry sprang from the contacts among Arabic, French, and Berber, and from reciprocal exchanges between orality and the written word—but, he adds, one could also say that contemporary Francophone Moroccan poetry was born under the influence of this youthful and comparatively short-lived journal.

Souffles was founded in 1966 by these poets, then in their twenties, who felt the urgent need for a poetic renewal in the Maghreb and a forum for it. In his editorial manifesto, Laâbi sought to dif-

ferentiate this new writing from the work of writers complacent or collaborating with the regime, and from the earlier generation of Francophone Maghrebin writers, even including Kateb Yacine, who, he claimed, were writing primarily for a French readership while describing Maghrebin realities. Fairly quickly, a wider span of creative energy crystallized around the journal: that of filmmakers, painters, playwrights, critics, and theorists. While Moroccan in its inception, it was open to writers from the rest of the Maghreb, and to "Third World writers" working in or translated into French as well. *Souffles* was banned by the government in 1972. Abdellatif Laâbi, who was also the leader of a leftist student/worker group, was arrested that same year, at the age of twenty-nine, for his political activities and was to spend the next eight years in the notorious Kénitra prison. (In 2010, the Moroccan national library, in an agreement with Abdellatif Laâbi, put the contents of the journal online: an invaluable anthology of the early work of many important Francophone Maghrebin writers, it can now be consulted at <http://bnm.bnm.ma:86/ListeVol.aspx?IDC=3>.)

Of the *Souffles* group, it was Mostafa Nissabouri (b. 1943 in Casablanca) who first befriended Rachida Madani, whose work most touched her, and who offered her commentaries and criticism of her own poetry: a mentor and a role model. Madani was a youthful militant who expressed her resistance with texts rather than participation in strikes or demonstrations. Among the arrested activists were young men and women who had been her classmates in high school or at university, natives of Tangiers like herself, whose families were close to hers. In a determined and increasingly politicized movement, the prisoners' families—notably their wives and mothers—demanded they be given increased access to books, to visits, and to trials, as most of them were being held without specific charge or sentence. (This decade and this movement are described vividly in Jocelyne Laâbi's memoir, *La liqueur d'aloès* [Aloe Brandy], pub-

lished in 2005.) In the 1970s, Madani succeeded in sending her new poems to a militant prisoner friend, who, in turn, circulated them among the political prisoners, where they came to the attention of Abdellatif Laâbi. These were the poems that made up her first collection, *Femme je suis*.

Laâbi, from prison, encouraged her to publish, although this would have been impossible in Morocco at that point, especially as Madani wanted him to preface her work, despite the disastrous consequences this would have had in their home country. He arranged a long-distance introduction to a friend in France, Ghislain Ripault, a slightly younger poet and editor who had lived in Morocco and had published Laâbi's own early work in a series called *Les Inéditions barbares*. Ripault became the publisher of Madani's first book, prefaced by Laâbi, in 1981, a small edition with limited circulation.

Here is one of those poems, speaking directly to the situations from which emerged both the political rebels, and those who did not rebel:

I am there
in your cell
sitting in the corner
there for five years now, my old brother
pale and silent
I watch you
and they pass before my eyes
the hearses you could not follow.

There were thirty of us
in a history class
we were poets, artists
we were already men
already women
and we had dreams

for the men
for the women
that's why, on the blackboard
we hung Mussolini
Hitler
Von Hindenburg
and the old history teacher
and we would sing
we sang
we sang
Victory.

They pass before my eyes
the hearses you could not follow.
Mimoun, the comedian
at term-end parties
became a cop
he salutes Mussolini
salutes Hitler
salutes Von Hindenburg
and the old history teacher.
Don't cry, old brother
over the hearses you could not follow.

There are no longer thirty of us
Hazlim our poet
hurled his poor blind head into the fire
surrounds himself with little dogs and howls at humans
under the full moon
a huge song of love and
rancor.

Do not cry, old brother
over the hearses you could not follow.

pale and silent
you look at me
and in your eyes pass
people burning the hearses
burning mussolini
hitler

von hindenburg
to make History over.

Madani began working on her second, organically unified book of poems a year or so later. While the poems of *Femme je suis* drew on the young poet's immediate experience, *Contes d'une tête tranchée* (Tales of a Severed Head) considers the issue of women's role in society, and the hierarchies oppressing both women and men, as she interrogates the frame of the thousand-year-old collection of tales (which may have migrated from Farsi into Arabic) that is *The Thousand and One Nights*—in which King Shehriyar, insanely distrustful of women, swears to marry a new wife each night and have her beheaded the next morning to prevent her from cuckolding him. In the story framing the tales, it is through the courage and wit of the young woman, Scheherazade, who volunteers to be the king's bride, and through the endless tales she invents and tells night after night (to her sister Dunyazad, in fact, with the king overhearing), that Shehriyar is healed of his obsession and the remaining virgins of his kingdom saved from death.

In *Contes d'une tête tranchée*, Rachida Madani's modern-day Scheherazade is also fighting for her own life and the lives of her fellow citizens. But in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and under the weight of Morocco's leaden years, the threat comes as much from dictatorship, official corruption, abuse and denial of human rights, poverty, and the detritus of colonialism as from the power still wielded over women by individual men. Madani's complex narrator, unlike Scheherazade, has no entry into the "palace." This is a story of contemporary resistance—but once again language provides the weapon. "I am no one / in Shehriyar's city," the poet says in canto XIX of the first tale: "I am nothing. / But I have words, / pauper's words / . . . stolen from the dogs' cemetery." The title of the book indicates ominously that a contemporary Scheherazade has less chance of prevailing than the original.

An American or European reader could, and not in error, interpret *Contes d'une tête tranchée* as being a feminist vindication—of political and social rights, of the right of the woman artist to recount and depict her story on her own terms. But the sixties, seventies, and eighties were in Morocco marked more deeply by severe political repression, and by the imprisonment and torture of dissenters, than by the identity-based liberation movements, feminist or ethnic, that the Maghreb nonetheless shared with Europe and both Americas. Madani's alternate Scheherazade is also the artist of any gender desperately trying to redefine her or his relationship with political power and those who hold it.

Rachida Madani writes that she first knew *The Thousand and One Nights* as a child, through stories told by her mother and older sisters, come to them through their grandmother, with no reference to their status as literature. The characters were as familiar as Cinderella or Puss in Boots for a European-American child (who would not necessarily think about Perrault or the brothers Grimm hearing these stories). *The Thousand and One Nights* resurfaced in a French translation when she was a university student, in the perhaps unlikely context of a class on the structure of the Nouveau Roman, with the "mise en abîme" of the *Nights'* tales posited as an insight into the experimental novelists' narrative strategy. In 1975 she read *La mille et deuxième nuit* (The Thousand and Second Night) of her friend and mentor Mostafa Nissabouri. His poems spin an entirely dystopic tale set in contemporary Casablanca. He is ruthless in stripping away Orientalist myth and cliché applied to and rallied against the Arab subject. Scheherazade herself, old and crippled, speaks in a different register, with no power to charm the harm from power. A decade later, the younger poet began her own sequence.

The figure of Scheherazade has elicited a varied and contentious response among contemporary Arab women writers. A 2004 anthology of Arab and Arab-American women's fiction, essays, and poetry

is titled *Scheherazade's Legacy*, and there is at least one dissertation on Arab-American women writers' appropriation of the Scheherazade role or persona. However, the Tunisian writer and scholar Fawzia Zouari published an autobiographical/critical narrative, *Pour en finir avec Shérazade* (Getting Rid of Scheherazade), in 1996, in which the character becomes the avatar of the woman who speaks only to deflect attention from herself, her demands and needs: "Each time I was tempted to speak, Scheherazade came up with a new story which bade me keep silent." And in 2010, the flamboyant Lebanese poet and editor Joumana Haddad published *I Killed Scheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman*—in English, quickly translated into both French and Arabic—another autobiographical manifesto of intellectual and sociosexual independence, of which Elfride Jelinek wrote: "Scheherazade has to die to be able to speak her true self, to tell her own story: that is, to become a human being." In contrast, the twelve-year-old niece of a Lebanese blogger asked her uncle: "Why would a woman like to kill Scheherazade? She told the story of Sinbad and she saved thousands of women who would have died if she were not a good storyteller. . . . I wish I had Scheherazade to keep me company."

I think it is at least partially the Orientalist baggage that has become associated with Scheherazade as an avatar of the (self-effacing, charming) Arab woman that accounts for these writers' rejections of a persona that could also be read as belonging to the long line of poet-trickster heroes, male and female, who wish precisely to deflect attention from themselves in order to get the best of the tyrant, the monster, or the enemy commander.

Rachida Madani as an Arab woman writer has at least as complex a relationship with the Scheherazade persona to symbolize the speaking subject as do these others. Her speaker makes frequent reference to Scheherazade but is a contemporary woman, or a composite of many women, in dialogue with her and with the frame story of the *Nights*, while commenting on and engaging urgent

issues, and with no access to the tyrant's ear. There is often a male interlocutor, but he is not King Shehriyar:

when the wisest one among you died.
He would walk along filled with the cries of subterranean cities
whose roofs he had torn off.
He walked with his hand on her woman's shoulder,
the man disfigured by his songs.

(The First Tale, XIV)

*Here a black car waits for him.
Here he was taken elsewhere
where his fingers were cut off,
where they blindfolded him
and fired into his mouth*

(The Second Tale, VI)

Madani's narrator rejects but ultimately redeems the myth Scheherazade has become (that of the shamanic woman storyteller) by turning her own poetic attention—and the reader's—to the city-state surrounding the storyteller that, equally, generated her situation, ending the *huis clos* between storyteller and dictator. The image of a "palace rebellion" as an option is recurrent. She directs the reader's attention to the silenced poets of both sexes, a clear reference to Moroccan political prisoners and the poets among them. In the Second Tale, she introduces the heretofore inaudible voice of a mother addressing her daughter in the midst of violence. The poet also considers female physicality in youth and age, and the narrator's awareness thereof—in the third sequence, in particular—not an issue in the *Nights* (how could Scheherazade become middle-aged?).

*Winters
winters gathered around my wrinkles.
Smoke fills my throat*

as I speak . . .

Is it the fire being lit even now

in the crystal palaces?

Is it the fire flaming up even now

among my listeners?

(The Third Tale XV, ellipsis in original)

Also in the Third Tale, Madani calls up one trope of classical Arabic poetry: the desert evocative of loss and of a nostalgia that can be viewed with irony.

Abdellatif Laâbi was released from prison in 1980, and emigrated to France with his wife, Jocelyne, and their children in 1984. There was a general amnesty of political prisoners in 1999 preceding the death of Hassan II. *Contes d'une tête tranchée* was published in Morocco by Editions Al-forkane in 2001. A collection of Madani's poems, including this book, was published in Paris by Les Éditions de la Différence in 2006. It was followed by a prose narrative, *L'Histoire peut attendre*—which could be translated *History Can Wait* or *The Story Will Follow*—located between novel, memoir, and what the French call auto-fiction, that brings a woman traveler into dialogue with her dead sister and an enigmatic figure from pre-Islamic and Islamic tradition called al-Khadir (the Green Man). In the 1990s, the poet undertook a more thorough study of Islam while also devoting more time to painting; since 2009 her work has been exhibited in Morocco with enthusiastic reception. She is now working on a second novel and a new collection of poems.

The visceral passion and the generosity of scope of *Contes d'une tête tranchée* attracted me on first reading, along with its simultaneous distrust of and reexamination/reappropriation of multiple traditions. But most of all I wanted to transmit the energy, direct and lyrically accurate, of Madani's language, a French informed by disparate literary traditions and still entirely its own.

"TALES OF A SEVERED HEAD" BY RACHIDA MADANI;
TRANSLATED BY MARILYN HACKER

Tales of a Severed Head

PREMIER CONTE

I

Quelle ville et quelle nuit
comme il fait nuit sur la ville
quand une femme et une gare se disputent
une même moitié d'homme qui s'en va.

Il est jeune, beau
il s'en va pour un peu de pain blanc.
Elle est jeune, belle comme une grappe

de printemps
qui essaie de fleurir une dernière fois
pour son homme qui s'en va.

Mais le train arrive
mais la branche casse
mais soudain il pleut dans la gare
en plein printemps.

Et il surgit de partout
il siffle puis traverse la femme
de toute sa longueur.
Où la femme saigne, il n'y aura plus jamais
de printemps.

La nuit, dans sa tête, sous l'oreiller
il passe des trains chargés d'hommes
chargés de boue

et tous la traversent dans
toute sa longueur.

Combien d'hivers encore, combien de neiges
avant la première lettre qui saigne,
avant la première bouchée de pain blanc ?

FIRST TALE

I

What city and what night
since it's night in the city
when a woman and a train station argue over
the same half of a man who is leaving.
He is young, handsome
he is leaving for a piece of white bread.
She is young, beautiful as a springtime
cluster
trying to flower for the last time
for her man who is leaving.
But the train arrives
but the branch breaks
but suddenly it's raining in the station
in the midst of spring.
And the train emerges from all directions
it whistles and goes right through the woman
the whole length of her.
Where the woman bleeds, there will never be spring
again.
In the night, in her head, under the pillow
trains pass filled with men
filled with mud
and they all go through her
the whole length of her.
How many winters will pass, how many snowfalls
before the first bleeding letter
before the first mouthful of white bread?

4 *Premier conte*

II

C'est peut-être la même ville
mais c'est une autre solitude
un autre chemin de pluie.

Un enfant marche dans la rue déserte
il suit un autre enfant
qui suit un chien
qui suit un autre chien
qui suit une odeur de pain.
Plus il s'approche de l'odeur
plus l'odeur de pain s'éloigne
voltige

 tournoie dans l'air
puis soudain monte se percher
sur le réverbère

 comme un papillon de nuit.

Et les deux petits garçons
et les deux petits chiens
au pied nu du réverbère
restent bouche ouverte

 dans un rond de lumière.

Et c'est la même nuit
et c'est la même solitude
et c'est le même enfant
dans la même rue

 dans la même ronde de réverbères.

Maintenant la faim sur sa joue
a rendu plus profond
le sillon tracé par les larmes.

II

Perhaps it's the same city
but a different solitude
another road of rain.
A child is walking down the empty street
he follows another child
who is following a dog
who follows another dog
who is following an odor of bread.
The closer he comes to the smell
the farther away the whiff of bread moves
flutters

 circles in the air
then suddenly climbs to perch
on the streetlight
 like a moth.

And the two little boys
and the two little dogs
at the bare foot of the streetlight
stay, open-mouthed
 in a circle of light.

And it's the same night
and it's the same solitude
and it's the same child
in the same street
 in the same circle of streetlights.

Now on his cheek hunger
has deepened
the furrow traced by tears.

6 *Premier conte*

Maintenant au bout de ses membres chétifs
il traîne un jouet de pauvre :
un carton
avec dedans un petit chien tout maigre
et une enfance toute rapiécée.

Cela fait un drôle de petit bruit
l'enfance rapiécée que l'on traîne
sur le pavé.

Mais l'enfant écoute la nuit
et rêve de toute sa faim
qu'il est devenu marin,
son carton un navire qui vogue
et porte loin son enfance
devenue oiseau
d'un seul tir d'aile.

Now with his scrawny limbs
he drags a pauper's toy:
 a cardboard box
and in it a skinny little dog
and a patched-together childhood.

It makes a peculiar little noise
that patched-up childhood dragged
 along the pavement.

But the child listens to the night
and dreams with all his hunger
that he has become a sailor,
his carton a ship which floats
carrying away his childhood
 which becomes a bird
 in one wing-beat.

III

Elle a perdu jusqu'à ses tatouages
la femme qui marche sur la falaise.
Elle a vendu ses bracelets
vendu sa chevelure
vendu ses seins blancs.
Elle a mis au clou sa dernière larme
sa dernière bouchée de pain.
Elle a parlé aux voisins
parlé au juge
parlé au vent.
Elle voulait son enfant la femme
qui marche sur la falaise.
Elle le voulait à elle
pour elle toute seule
l'enfant de ses entrailles.
Elle voulait le bercer encore
comme font toutes les femmes
doucement, doucement en chantant
comme toutes les nuits, le bercer
l'enfant de ses entrailles.

Mais les hommes
mais le vent la poussent sur la falaise.
Elle regarde l'océan
elle voudrait se précipiter dans l'océan
pour boire l'océan.
Mais d'un seul coup tous ses tatouages
reviennent s'installer à leur place

III

She has lost everything, even her tattoos,
the woman who walks on the cliff.

She has sold her bracelets
sold her hair
sold her white breasts.

She has pawned her last tear
her last mouthful of bread.

She has talked to the neighbors
talked to the judge
talked to the wind.

She wanted her child, that woman
who walks on the cliff.

She wanted him for herself
for herself alone
the child of her womb.

She wanted still to be rocking him
as all women do
gently, gently, singing
as she sang every night, to rock him
the child of her womb.

But men
but the wind push her out on the cliff.
She watches the ocean
she would like to hurl herself into the ocean
to drink up the ocean.
But suddenly all her tattoos
return to their places

et tous se mettent à parler en même temps...
D'un seul coup elle retrouve
les légendes vertes et bleues
inscrites dans sa chair.
Maintenant elle est debout face au ressac
ses yeux sont secs
sa bouche est un pli.
Maintenant elle quitte la falaise
et elle s'en va...
Maintenant, elle va vers sa propre justice.

and they all begin to speak at once . . .
All at once she finds
the green and blue legends
inscribed on her flesh.
Now she is standing facing the backwash
her eyes are dry
her mouth is a fold.
Now she leaves the cliff
and goes away . . .
Now she goes toward her own justice.

"BRAZEN PLAGIARIST: SELECTED POEMS" BY KIKI DIMOULA

*The Brazen Plagiarist:
Selected Poems*

KIKI DIMOULA

TRANSLATED BY

CECILE INGLESSIS MARGELLOS

AND RIKA LESSER

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS ■ NEW HAVEN & LONDON

A MARGELLOS

WORLD REPUBLIC OF LETTERS BOOK

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*For my husband, Theodore, who makes all impossible
things possible*

C.I.M.

*In memory of Etta Veit-Simon Japha,
whose life spirit, families, and countries also are mine*

R.L.

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**THOUGHTS OF AN AWKWARD IMMIGRANT
TO A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

Kiki Dimoula

And yet I'm traveling. I'm going to the magnificent English language, unknown to me, though sixty years ago I lived in London for several months and learned to mumble the alphabet of elementary communication — those few phrases necessary to sustain the illusion that we know what we don't.

Years later, I had to return to England more than once, but for far less joyful reasons. Still this dismal difference never reclaimed the sparkling gift of the unprecedented bestowed by my first visit. Yes, in London my sense of fleeing — untouched and chaste until then — lost its virginity.

My ecstatic strolling through the parks, whose welcoming moist grass promised velvet continuity to my steps, is still green in my memory. Green, too, remains the mysterious gray of London's atmosphere, where my soul was probably initiated into a similar grayness.

But the important thing is that I'm going to an unknown language filled with apprehension, even if they say that, knowing how the universal is spoken, poetry is in no danger of losing its way in any worldly unknown.

Anyway, the few things I've written in my life set out on this journey accompanied by an excellent letter of introduction — their translation. This time it is signed by two heroic translators, Cecile Inglessis Margellos and Rika Lesser. I say heroic because I believe that translation is an act of self-abandonment, indeed of self-oblivion, so the translator may enter unprejudiced into otherness; so she may

break through the secretive precautions the impulsive wording takes in order to prevent its immediate consumption by perception's voracious ease.

The only painless duty of the translator is bringing the dictionaries of two languages, strangers to one another, face to face and forcing them to speak to each other. But her heaviest and most exhausting task, henceforth tantamount to an *ex nihilo* creation, is convincing a word to leave its country and entrust its meaning—great or small—to an unknown guardianship.

Not easy at all. Each word has its life, its past, its ego, its self-esteem. It resists. It doesn't want to leave all this to the mercy of some foreign handling, however reverential. If you promise a poem that, translated, it will be rid of its imperfections, that its dissonance will become harmonious, that its level of transcendence, dreamed but not attained, will heighten, I suspect it will not consent—at least not willingly. An honest poem will not easily disavow even its most humble origin.

I know well by instinct how much a word will torment the translator before conceding to its emigration. And maybe I would interpret this resistance as the word's vindictiveness against its identity's abductor.

More simply, every word driven from its homeland by translation is afraid that in the other land, the other language, the ashes of its feelings may get scattered, that no appropriate urn for words will be found there for the safekeeping of purposelessness—who knows what other countries' traditions about decay can be? Every native word fears that translation may not hermetically seal memory's little phial, and that the past, fleeting in any case, will instantly evaporate.

The translatable has these and other worries—for instance, whether the bridge from one language to another is sound enough, whether it can bear the weight of a word's rhythm, since its rhythm does not stand alone but is inseparable from that of its neighbors.

Will translation's bridge support the heavy load of interpretative

clothing meaning brings with it? Meaning fears it will be allowed only one piece, the most superficial and, hence, very conveniently, the lightest possible for a safe crossing to the comprehensible.

Fortunately, what I have written is not anxious, not crabby, not arrogant; it does not believe in the untranslatability of its very light aspiration, which is none other than to find a place to hide myself, so that I or my writings will not be discovered too soon by decay. Besides, isn't art's secret aim to erect a statue in honor of the temporary, charitably delayed?

I rest assured that the translators of my small wings will not force them to fly too high and that they will keep hushed the scream of this old line of mine: "Bending down, I was gazing at the sky," a line supportive of every discouragement.

I am grateful to both translators for their redeeming solutions to the problems of my written life. I thank Rika, whom I know only through Cecile's introductory praise and her subsequent reassertions of her co-translator's linguistic craftsmanship and infallible translational ethics. But most of all I thank Cecile, who inspired my admiring comments on the translator's labors, founded on and supported by my prolonged and intimate contact with her mind—an amalgam of stainless steel rationality and gossamer-silk sensibility.

Of course, Cecile and I often engaged in debate about my poetry. To me it seemed obvious I was no Rilke, no Cavafy, no Auden, but Cecile kept digging for profound meanings under undeniable weaknesses, or the wingless vagueness of some line of mine. She was convinced that these very ambiguities were emitting panic-stricken distress signals. I must confess that whenever Cecile, in her pugnacious prescience, asked me what I meant in this or that line, while I kept whispering "I don't know" or "I don't remember what I had in mind"—that often happens to a poet—she would come up with an extremely appealing interpretation. So identical to what I myself would have offered, I would adopt it without hesitation, neglecting my possible misappropriation of intellectual property.

That's all well and good, but one question remains: upon arrival at that checkpoint, will acceptance expect me or will rejection immediately . . . deport me?

How will I enter Yale, how will I start making noise without a belt packed with explosive values? If they ask me what poetry is, what will I say? "I don't know"? And if they ask me what inspiration is, what will I say? "Who knows"? Will they consider my answers literary or illiterate? Who knows . . .

THE OMNIPOTENCE OF THINGS

Cecile Inglessis Margellos

*These pages are translations. From a tongue
That haunts the memory I have become.*

—Yves Bonnefoy

At her induction into the Athens Academy in 2002, Kiki Dimoula—a female poet addressing an audience of men, mostly scholars and scientists—shied away from trying to define concepts, which “only through Art’s intervention can undergo a metamorphosis from something known into something unknown in such a way as to offer a pleasant surprise.”

Then she launched a metaphor:

“Once, on the road to Alexandroupolis [in Thrace], long before I reached the city, I saw storks’ nests, high up, at the tops of a line of telegraph poles.

“Protruding from the poles, the bases of the nests were fluffy and shiny, like the fancy frills that decorate cradles, ready to welcome newborns. In the middle of each nest stood a stork, erect, immobile, on one leg, as if in this ascetic position, in this ciphered balance, it was protecting secrecy’s sacred hatchling, already protected from above by the celestial cradle net.

“Poetry is like a nest to hide in. It is built on a pointed height so as to be inaccessible to the rapacious curiosity of anyone who wants to see too clearly what’s being hatched inside it. The most efficient way to safeguard concealment is by subtraction. Art is ever-vigilant, elliptical, balancing on one leg. When we write, we subtract.”

Playfully intricate as it may be, this metaphor provides more than one thread to lead us through Dimoula's poetic labyrinth. Art is a stork: in order to protect its very common egg-words against base interpretation, it must build its very common nest on uncommonly inaccessible heights. Then it must guard that nest by standing in it, precariously balanced on one leg. Poetry is thus a craft of elevation and concealment, paradoxically reached through curtailment.

Dimoula does not claim that art should keep the *hoi polloi* at a safe distance. She does imply, however, that a too-conspicuous poetry risks triviality by inviting a univocal reading. What guards against conspicuousness, thereby protecting the poem's diversity of meaning, is elliptical expression. Less is more in poetic ethics, too.

Mystery is therefore paramount to poetry and one way to achieve it is through elevation. Yet contrary to the Longinian sublime, this elevation is not a matter of theme: the poet does not dwell on elevated subjects, motifs, ideas, or words but elevates common—or poeticizes anti-poetical—ones. Through her *alchimie du verbe*, Dimoula transmutes "lower class" things into precious ones, base metals into gold. Even an unremarkable adverb will change rank on the ontological ladder, climbing to a higher level—human or semi-divine:

To you, *Suddenly*, I appeal.

Dreamfed *Suddenly*,
insanely brave, beautiful.
["My Last Body"]

"By glorifying what is apparently insignificant, [Dimoula] creates a secret poetic theology of ecumenical ramifications," noted the poet Chistoforos Lontakis.

Hand in hand with this elevation is Dimoula's defamiliarization of the familiar through animistic gestures:

Today's Friday I'll go to the market square
to stroll through the decapitated gardens

to see the aroma of oregano
enslaved in small bunches.
["As If You'd Chosen"]

Her anthropomorphism encompasses objects ("foolish bells"), natural phenomena ("eavesdropping light," "mistrustful green," "irresolute fruit"), bodily functions ("And when we cry, don't listen / to the glands' lie / that supposedly tears wash their hands"), and abstractions ("venomous abundance of opposites," "love-crazed splendor"). Yet this re-enchantment of our "worn-out earth" is counterbalanced by a frequent disenchantment of high and mighty notions. Cardinal concepts—love, death, memory, oblivion, soul, heaven—are violently shaken off their pedestals. "Formerly great significances" undergo a radical demystification and are treated with flippant impertinence. Take Eternity, for instance:

"Believe me, I'll love you eternally"
Death repeats every moment
to Eternity

and moaning
with miserable certainty

"oh, can't you just lie for once!"

she curses him.
["Selective Eternity"]

Dimoula's desacralizing irony does not even spare God:

Whether or not you were involved in the slip of omnipotence,
in our terror's ancient
authentic gospels remains inscribed
the exorbitant price you demand for your immortality:
our mortality
(your great slanderer but also your supporter).
["The Unproven Is Innocent"]

She speculates, "Maybe miracles are also mortal." Speculating, or even doubting, however, does not resemble Jacques Derrida's rejection of "the metaphysics of presence," nor does it amount to a total negation. It does not even mirror the primordial Hesiodic Chaos or the abysmal nothingness to which the Greek writer Nikos Dimou referred in his article "In Photography's Square Night" (1990): "Photographs are one of Kiki Dimoula's major themes. How could it be otherwise? Every photograph, be it the humblest, is the presence of an absence. And Dimoula's poetry, as poetry of the nonbeing, always circles around this absence. 'What has died' may not always exist in a photograph, but what exists in a photograph is certainly dead. The instant dies in the instantaneous snapshot."

Indisputably, a photograph is an instant's still life, the printed record of its fleeting light:

Your photograph stationary.
 You look as if you're on your way
 you smile as if you're not.
 Dried flowers to one side
 ceaselessly repeat
 their unsoiled name *sempervivum*
sempervivum — everlasting, everlasting
 so you won't forget what you are not.
 ["Nonexpectations"]

But does this "presence of absence" really signify an existential or metaphysical void? I would argue that Dimou's oxymoron points in the opposite direction. Instead of a nonbeing, it indicates an excess of being, where absence *itself* becomes a living and acting thing.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes discusses photography's mechanical repetition of "what could never be repeated existentially," and the kind of "absented presence" that ensues. Dimoula's photographs accede, for their part, to a higher and fuller existential

status. Looking at a photograph produces a sought-after mnemonic effect (let's call it a *voluntarily* involuntary memory), whereby temporal distance is magically abolished. In this new, conflated temporality, absences are substantiated not as ghosts of a new Odyssean *nekylia* but as incarnate companions: "I love photographs," confessed Dimoula in a 2011 interview, "because they give flesh to shadows. And this prevents them from disintegrating and disappearing right away."

Photographs are but one example of Dimoula's vitalism, whose tidal stream fills her poems with animated beings: words, objects, people, feelings (love, unlove, despair, longing, loss), and abstractions (life, old age, decay, time, death, more time, more death, time again). Corporeal or spectral, creatures of language or the stuff of dreams, they are all vividly present. They flood the same space and share the same level of reality (or unreality).

In her own quest for the poetic rose, "absent from all bouquets," Dimoula—unlike Stéphane Mallarmé—becomes an inveterate anti-Platonist: it is not Ideas that are dissimulated by material things but things that are hidden inside Ideas. Her *démarche* is noticeably akin to that of Yves Bonnefoy, who believes that poetry's role is not to reveal a different or higher reality but to open a (steep) path that leads to it. In fact, Dimoula's stance is metaphysical only if *metaphysical* is not construed as transcending the physical but as following behind it, inferior to it in rank (according to one of the etymologies of the Greek prefix *meta-*).

To the journalist Olga Sella, Dimoula admitted: "Of course I'm a realist, since after every boisterous and vainglorious dream, which first shakes me up and then walks out on me, I always catch myself pompously declaring, *So then things are thus*, as I acknowledge the omnipotence of things."

Not only do these things/beings never completely disappear or die, but they keep exchanging attributes and qualities as if driven by an irresistible metamorphic impulse. This is especially apparent in

situations of deep emotional distress, as in the poem "Mother of the Floor Below," which describes her daughter and grandchildren's moving from the family house to a new apartment:

The moving die's been cast—the upstairs apartment now an
empty cube.

Packed into huge cartons the needle and thread that
sewed offspring footsteps, descendant noises
to the hem of my reassurance—water, sweet affectionate child,
running through the night and down
to me so I could hear it.

Cartons boxes bundles well-secured with the severed
umbilical cord.

It was no longer possible no elevator no garage
especially no extra bath, an entire four-membered excuse—
the mother is of very old construction.

There is no deliberate carnivalistic reversal in Dimoula's poems. Nor is there a grotesque or scatological aspect, symptomatic of the Rabelaisian novel or satyr drama. Yet the levels between natural and social hierarchies—high and low, lofty and abject—become indistinct. In the baroque construction of her texts, divisions between heterogeneous ontological categories—material and immaterial, profane and sacred, prosaic and lyrical, ominous and comical—disappear. Opposites become interchangeable: humans are reified, abstractions anthropomorphized, nouns adjectivized and adjectives (as well as verbs, adverbs, pronouns, prepositions) nominalized.

Most important, the boundaries between literality and figurality become permeable. For Dimoula's vision of things is neither literal nor metaphoric: it is a unique blend of metaphorized literality and literal metaphoricity—one constantly sliding under the other's skin. As with *leaning*, for instance, in the poem "I Went Through," which undergoes a dual grammatical and figural mutation—the adjectival

participle becomes a gerund, while the body's position is transformed into a metaphor for time:

I received brief postcards:
a cordial farewell from Patras
and some regards
from the Leaning Tower of Pisa.
No, I'm not sad about the day's leaning.

More revelatory still is the cunning superposition of linguistic, literal, and figural strata in the poem "The Periphrastic Stone" — a title itself bespeaking this accumulation. Here each word is simultaneously a lexical entity, a three-dimensional thing (or being), and a metaphor:

Say something.
Say "wave," which won't stand still.
Say "rowboat," which sinks
if overloaded with intentions.
Say "instant,"
which shouts *help*, it's drowning,
don't save it,
say
"didn't hear a thing."

Dimoula's amalgamating technique is equally accountable for her mordant irony, which infuses absurdity into sturdy pragmatism and imbues tragedy with comedy. For Dimoula is, like all true tragedians, prodigiously funny. Through her corrosive humor, the most melancholy or downright macabre instances dissolve into satire:

It rains with absolute candor.
So the sky is not a rumor
it does exist
and therefore earth is not
the sole solution

as each lazy dead person pretends.
[“Untitled”]

The corollary is self-mockery—a constant trait. Dimoula displays an acute knowledge of human nature, her own first and foremost:

Whatever you tell the pen, it writes.
You think remember suppose love dictate.
.
Sometimes when the pen lets the cold in
because precautions warp
due to the age of the hardships,
you distort the image slightly—
turning a feeling that reaps bitter winter
into one that plucks chamomiles
and so the text’s weather grows milder.
[“Painful Revelation”]

The professor and poet Nasos Vagenas rightly noted this paradoxical intermingling of lyricism and irony in Dimoula’s self-referential verse: “Qualifying irony as ‘lyrical’ is in itself ironic, for it constitutes a contradiction in terms: irony (contemplating things from a distance) is the opposite of lyricism (expressing a personal feeling born from within).”

Thus, from stanza to stanza, Dimoula’s extraordinary and extraordinarily moving poetry transforms our way of seeing. Our most stereotypical realities undergo a metamorphosis—or, better still, an anamorphosis, the distortion of perspective so dear to Renaissance painters. While absence becomes steel, “tears’ words get completely lost,” and a childhood trauma “grows teeth hair crooked nails knives,” we start seeing “the skull beneath the skin”—as does Webster in T. S. Eliot’s “Whispers of Immortality.” But on that same skull we also detect a frolicsome or deeply compassionate smile.

Nikos Dimou shrewdly observed that J. A. Cuddon’s description of the seventeenth-century English metaphysicals (Donne, Herbert,

Marvell) applies as well to Dimoula: "Arresting and original images and conceits (showing a preoccupation with analogies between macrocosm and microcosm), wit, ingenuity, dexterous use of colloquial speech, considerable flexibility of rhythm and meter, complex themes (both sacred and profane), a liking for paradox and dialectical argument, a direct manner, a caustic humour, a keenly felt awareness of mortality, and a distinguished capacity for elliptical thought and tersely compact expression." If we add the unorthodox, indeed heretical, use of the Greek language, the strangled syntax, and the delight in neologisms, this constitutes a fine synopsis of Dimoula's poetics.

But one could equally relate Dimoula's anticlassical aesthetics to the art of French baroque poets such as Théophile de Viau, Tristan L'Hermite, Saint-Amant, and Étienne Durant. Her verse is redolent of their asymmetries, dialectical arguments, paradoxes, and techniques of illusionism and chiaroscuro. The American Emily Dickinson's grammatical heterodoxy, undercut transcendentalism, and anticlimactic irony are also kindred. As are Wisława Szymborska's earthbound animism and satire-ridden morbidity. (An example of similarity in theme and tonality is the portrayal of death in Szymborska's "On Death, Without Exaggeration": "It can't even get the things done / that are part of its trade: / dig a grave, / make a coffin, / clean up after itself," from *The People on the Bridge*, translated by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh.) Moreover, the notable kinship in ontological approach between Dimoula's and Yves Bonnefoy's poetic stances is worth stressing (compare the similar treatment of the photograph motif in Dimoula's "Photograph 1948" and "Montage" and Bonnefoy's "A Photograph" and "Another Photograph," translated by Hoyt Rogers in *Second Simplicity: New Poetry and Prose*, 1991–2011.)

Of all the aspects of her craft, however, Dimoula clearly prefers to underscore the formal ones. In 2007, two poets, Antonis Fostieris and Thanassis Niarchos, asked her: "In your poems one usually

senses an absence, a lack, a paradise lost—whether these relate to a person, an age in life, an object, or a situation. Is poetry, necessarily, the satisfaction of a privation, the consolation for a misfortune, the healing of a wound?" Typically, Dimoula skirted her interviewers' focus on biographical or psychological content to stress the importance of language: "In addition to all the things you enumerate, which are undoubtedly true, there also exists a special, secretive time whose only concern is to cultivate the future of language, its euphonic use, its functional relation to subtraction, its co-habitation with allusion—in short, to cultivate this mysterious *how*: how it is possible that, even though all has been said, language insists and persuades us that the most important things still remain unsaid."

Here we can detect Dimoula's concern—indeed, her anxiety—to mitigate the impression that her poetry is primarily descriptive, narrative, or didactic. We feel her need to shift the emphasis from the semantic to the linguistic aspects of her work, from the signified to the signifier. She insists that a poem is also a matter of form and structure—a text is *texture*. Poetic diction, says Dimoula, requires euphony—by which she means a prosaic and sometimes dissonant musicality rather than a consonant melodiousness. But most of all, it requires mystery and allusion, which in turn demand subtraction—which takes us back to the one-legged stork.

But if subtraction is a key element in Dimoula's poetic architecture, of what kind is it? It is not lexical minimalism, for her vocabulary is anything but spare. Dimoula's poetic stance first centers around structure, or rather a destructured restructuring. On all levels: lexical, grammatical, syntactic, and semantic.

Critics invoke musical parallels, comparing her poems' form to that of a fugue, the only term "capable of describing the variety and wealth of contrapuntal combinations that we come across in her work" (Yiorgos Yottis). Others compare her poetry to pop art (Janis Psychopedis) or define it as "surrealism of grammar and syntax" (Tasos Roussos). I believe that analytic cubism is an even more ap-

appropriate pictorial analogue: multifaceted objects, fusion of planes, nonlinear perspective, spatio-temporal simultaneity. An architectural correlate would be deconstructivism. Frank Gehry's irregular shapes and iconoclastic, dynamic geometry come to mind.

There is no doubt that Dimoula's structure dispenses with linguistic armature, grammatical pillars, syntactic pegs, morphological and logical supports, lexical symmetries and semantic articulations. Her compact synthesis relies on reduction, shortcutting, and elimination. The mysterious "ciphered balance" she evokes derives from an initial imbalance, prompted by a technique of destabilization. For Dimoula believes that access to a new or regained meaning, to a *sens retrouvé*, is possible only if poetic utterance (certainly *her* poetic utterance) loses its foothold and is thereby forced to seek a new, delicate yet firm equilibrium.

It is a truism that in literature, especially in poetry, content is inextricably linked to form, and that the latter is inseparable from the structure of the language it employs. This makes translation of poetry—"where even the order of the words is a mystery" (to borrow Saint Jerome's adage about the sacred scriptures)—an arduous task.

To translate even the most conventional or prosaic line of poetry from Greek into English, one must come to grips with the crippling and sometimes forbidding differences between the two language structures. Contrary to English, Greek is a gendered and pronoun-dropping language. It is also a highly inflected one—an aspect that allows a relatively free-ordered syntax. Inevitably, these inherent formal and structural features affect the outcome of English translations from Greek both semantically and stylistically.

The fact that Greek nouns (as well as pronouns, adjectives, participles, and articles) possess genders (feminine, masculine, and neuter) greatly facilitates allegorizing. Take, for instance, the first lines of Dimoula's "Selective Eternity": "'Believe me, I'll love you eternally' / Death repeats every moment / to Eternity." In Greek, "death"

(θάνατος) is masculine, whereas “eternity” (αἰωνιότητα) is feminine. Not only are the two abstractions automatically personifiable because of their genders, but their belonging to opposite “sexes” makes their “love affair” all the more obvious. In our genderless English rendition, the allegorical aspect was dealt with by the capitalization of both nouns and by making Eternity a “she” in the last line. Still, the playing-out of this parodic courtship between two de facto genderless abstractions makes less immediate sense to the English reader.

The lack of gender in English affects even this volume’s title: *The Brazen Plagiarist*. It is taken from the title of a brilliant self-referential poem about writing, personified as a “brazen unholy plagiarist.” In Greek, “writing” (γραφή) is feminine. It is by no means inconsequential that the word shares the writer’s own gender—that, thereby, the craft is identified with the craftswoman, the poetic deed with the poet herself. From the translator’s point of view, the semantic loss is of no little importance. Had the title been in Greek, the existential undertones of the coincidence of genders would have instantly come into sharp relief.

Additionally, inferable pronouns may be omitted in Greek, whereas English sentences require a subject. In English translations, the repetition of a subject before each verb, especially in poems written in the first person (frequent in Dimoula’s corpus), is visually and rhythmically disruptive. In our rendition of “I Went Through,” for instance, the first-person subject pronoun “I” (totally absent in the Greek) is repeated no less than thirty-eight times, twenty-three of them at the beginning of the line:

I take a walk and night falls.
 I make a decision and night falls.
 No, I’m not sad.

 I’ve been curious and studious.
 I know things. Something about everything.

Another substantial difference between the two languages: in the Greek language, the relations among parts of speech are clearly defined by their inflections. This allows a very free word order. (Of course Dimoula goes farther still, dispensing with punctuation and articles, largely resorting to figures of speech—anacolutha, asyndeta, hyperbata, enjambment, and so on—in short, breaking the norms of even this very loose syntactic order.) Conversely, in English, grammatical and syntactic relations are indicated by a more or less determined position of the words in the sentence, and, additionally, by pronouns, prepositions, auxiliaries, particles, and other markers. Moreover, Greek can be made even more compact by its wide variety (even the ad hoc creation) of compound words. Thus, the analytical English phrasing often struggles to mirror the density of the Greek. To give but one example, in the first stanza of “The Finder’s Reward,” the English translation, laconic as it strives to be, contains nine more words than the source text:

Thumbing through, you hesitated now and then
in your reading, as if something had got to you,
unread, the pages were secretly laughing.

Τὰ ξεφύλλιζες, κοντοστεκόσουν κάθε τόσο
διάβαζες τάχα κάτι σὲ διαπερνοῦσε
ἀδιάβαστες κρυφογελοῦσαν οἱ σελίδες.

The most economical translations my co-translator and I could come up with for these lines’ subject-free, one-word Greek verbs demanded a minimum of two words each: “thumbing through” (ξεφύλλιζες), “you hesitated” (κοντοστεκόσουν), “had got to” (διαπερνοῦσε), “were secretly laughing” (κρυφογελοῦσαν).

An emblematic poem in the present volume epitomizes and metaphorizes the Greek language’s formal characteristics, intermingling poetic and meta-poetic, figural and pragmatic dimensions within a

single conceit. It reflects on the meaning of meaning-ridden words—*love, fear, memory, night*—via their grammatical definitions.

Love:
noun, substantive,
extremely substantive,
singular in number;
gender not feminine, not masculine,
gender defenseless.
Plural the number
of defenseless loves.

Fear:
substantive,
singular to start with
plural afterward:
fears.
Fears of
everything from now on.
["The Plural"]

A side note: In Greek grammatical reality, as in traditional allegorical imagery, "love" (*eros*) is masculine. But in Dimoula's personal mythology it can be claimed by neither gender—and certainly not by the neuter!

If dealing with the conventional morphological and structural features of Greek prose is a challenge for even the most seasoned translator, translating Dimoula's unconventional, deconstructed, and unorthodox idiom into English is indeed a tall order. No wonder so few English translations of this major poet have seen the light until now. With two notable exceptions—David Connolly's publication of forty-six poems in 1996, and Olga Broumas' twenty-poem Web site publication in 2011—only a few translations of Dimoula's

poems can be found, scattered throughout various English anthologies of Greek poetry. True as it may be that “impossible things in translation are those that haven’t been done” (David Bellos), Dimoula’s translators—especially into English—bend under the weight of what I would nonetheless call near-impossibilities.

These challenges were exponentially multiplied for the present translation, for it was the product of collaboration between two translators, geographically, biographically, and even culturally oceans apart: Rika Lesser, an accomplished American poet and translator of Swedish and German poetry, who spoke not a word of Greek; and me, a Greek literary translator into and from Greek, ancient Greek, and French, whose English was precarious. Obvious questions arise: Why use *two* translators and why us? The reason behind this venturesome choice was my firmly held conviction that translating Dimoula’s poetry demanded qualities hard to find in a single translator: a native speaker’s immersion in both languages and their cultural heritages (something quite impossible unless you are Nabokov), solid translational and poetic ability, a transcendent belief in and an incandescent passion for translation, and a zealot’s faith in Dimoula’s poetic genius.

I assumed (perhaps presumptuously) that I possessed certain of these qualities—devotion to and understanding of Dimoula’s oeuvre above all. Before I decided to embark body and soul on this translation, I ran some comparative tests: much to my surprise, where I read ἀρεϊψάνιος πλοῦτος as “chain-smoking wealth,” for example, experienced translation wordsmiths had read it as “bellicose wealth” (trusting the adjective’s etymology of the word), “opulent wealth,” or “panache’s wealth.” To me, these were misinterpretations indicative of the difficulty (for a non-native speaker of Greek, especially) in following the arcane evolution of a word’s meaning from ancient to contemporary, colloquial Greek. Dimoula’s command and subtle use of these changes of signification were even more difficult to apprehend.

But in taking on this translation, I also knew that I lacked other

qualities—mastery of English (let alone of poetic English), first and foremost. It was therefore evident that a talented co-translator was needed. Jennifer Banks, my insightful editor at Yale University Press, was certain that Rika Lesser was the ideal person. It was she who put the two of us into contact and encouraged us to undertake this translation in tandem.

Of course, there were risks, drawbacks, sometimes insurmountable obstacles, and virulent disputes. Dimoula's Greek is ingeniously un-Greek. Preserving her idiosyncrasies qua idiosyncrasies in English was, in turn, an acrobatic exercise. Rendering her misuse—even abuse—of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax, re-creating her sparkling wordplay, conveying her syncretic idiom with its surprising interweaving of a demotic vernacular and an archaic or formal, mandarin, Greek required a juggler's skill.

Normalization, standardization, homogenization were never far away, at least at the beginning, when my co-translator must have thought that I was either totally unschooled in English or a dogmatic literalist, or both. But even later, the temptation to standardize had to be kept on a tight leash, if only because, as David Bellos posits, "Translators are instinctively averse to the risk of being taken for less than fully cultivated writers of their target tongue." The urge to correct lexical incongruities, put one-legged grammar back on its two feet, smooth out semantic asperities—in short, to "better" Dimoula's Greek in English—kept coming back like a return of the repressed, against a deeper feeling that what Walter Benjamin calls "the incomprehensible, the secret, the 'poetic'" ought to be preserved.

Since this is meant to be an introduction, not a monograph, I will focus on a few areas in which Dimoula's stylistic mannerisms caused us permanent headaches: nominalizations, adjectivizations, and neologisms.

Nominalizations are probably the most striking trait in Dimoula's idiom, detectable even in many of her book titles: *The Little of the World*, *Hail Never*, *A Moment of Two*, *Sound of Distancings*. Di-

moula will nominalize (reifying or personifying) just about everything: a conventional greeting: "we sat on the same *good morning* / and gazed at nature" ("good morning" translates the single word καλημέρα, which is far simpler to turn into a noun than the two-word English greeting). An exclamation: "I thought of throwing a blossoming Amen." A verb: "the *it-happened-so*" (the verb is έτυχε; the unavoidable addition of the personal pronoun "it" gave our compound verb an even less nounlike aspect; thus adding italics and hyphens was the only solution). A preposition: "the withouts have changed" (the plural is as strange in Greek as it is in English; we kept it). A pronoun: "Identical to That, just like twins. / I, however, am far more afraid of This." An adverb: "The supine rows best." (We started off by cautiously normalizing: "Rowing supine is simplest." But Rika—who was gradually "turning Kikian"—agreed to risk a bolder rendition.) An adjective: "Unfruitfuls" (an uncountable adjective transformed into a countable noun; we could not but singularize it, and it became "Unfruitful").

Nominalized adjectives were a conundrum. They are relatively common in Greek and uncountably many in Dimoula's verse, but rare in English. In many cases, we had to resort to various imperfect solutions depending on the context: capitalization (the Known, the Unknown, the Inexplicable), italics ("that *irrevocable* / that prunes us"), reformulation by a relative clause ("And winds that uproot what is stagnant"), a gerund ("ripening"). But most often we would use an abstract noun, a solution that resulted in a semantic deviation, if not necessarily a clear loss. Abstract nouns, such as *bitterness*, *recurrence*, or *pointlessness*, are not the exact semantic equivalents of their corresponding nominalized adjectives: *the bitter*, *the recurrent*, *the pointless*. The Greek decoding brain construes the former as allegories but understands the latter as pointedly instantiated things or beings. On the poet's stage, they become concrete objects or living actors—all fully participating in her play.

Since in Dimoula's poetry everything is interchangeable, the cor-

ollary to nominalization is adjectivization, whereby beings or incorporeal entities become qualities or attributes. In “Oblivion’s Adolescence,” for instance, a gaze qualifies a thread: “With eyesight thread I stitch in place / the silver buttons of Distance.” Our “eyesight” translates Dimoula’s neologistic adjective βλεμιάτινη: “gazy” or “made of gaze.” Keeping the adjectival form in English was no easy task (we had also considered “sightliney” at some point). Nor were this poem’s other translators any luckier—“thread of sight,” “gazing’s thread,” “my look like a thread” all seemed even weaker.

With Dimoula’s neologisms, we were indeed on very slippery ground. “Pre-hangman” (a title) was not much of a dilemma, since it was a match to Dimoula’s equally invented Προ-Δήμιος. Nor was the epithet “Godfallen” (“To you, Godfallen / small-bodied Time”), which imitated the neologism Θεοκατέβατε—Dimoula’s brilliant coinage after the existing compound word οὐρανοκατέβατος, “sky-fallen.”

Conversely, “Charonography” did not come easily. It is used to translate Χαρογραφία (Charography), an invented compound forged from Χάρος (Charon, the ferryman of Hades) and the suffix -γραφία (“-graphy”)—probably an ironic wordplay with the quasi-homophone χορογραφία (choreography). In the eerie atmosphere of this poem about a visit to a drugstore in which poison phials are on display, Dimoula’s neologism was impressively apposite.

The greatest controversy, though, occurred over “Nonexpectations”—our final translation of Ἀπροσδοκίες—a hard-won, last minute victory of “Nonexpectations” over both “Unexpectedations” and “Non-expectations.” Ἀπροσδοκίες is a poem title, repeated within the poem, and paired with the equally incongruous, extremely rare ἀγνωρισιά (nonrecognition). The crux of the matter was mainly the following lines, in which the speaker speculates on the chances of an encounter in the afterlife, while looking at her deceased companion’s photograph:

No news from you.
Your photograph stationary.
As it rains without raining.

As a shadow returns a body to me.
And as we will meet up there
one day.
In some barrens overgrown
with shady nonexpectations
and evergreen circumlocutions.

We argued over this forever, Rika insisting upon “non-expectations” (mostly on grounds of linguistic incongruity), I refusing to budge from “unexpectations.” My reasons for opposing her were (a) morphological: “unexpectations” looked more like a *word* than the hyphenated “non-expectations”; (b) stylistic: I was convinced that ἀπροσδοκίες was Dimoula’s creation, typical of her inclination toward neologism, and that it should therefore be treated accordingly and matched with an analogous, however bizarre, neologism in English; (c) semantic, most of all: I assumed that it had stemmed from the existing adjective ἀπροσδόκητο (unexpected). Since “unexpected” is perforce something unforeseeably realized, this inconceivable encounter did not seem so inconceivable after all. I had therefore reached the conclusion that, contrary to “non-expectations,” with or without a hyphen, the Greek word revealed a secret hope for an otherworldly happy ending; in other words, I had willfully endowed it with positive undertones.

Well, I was wrong. The word, though unknown to Dimoula, and a hapax legomenon (it is to be found only in Speusippus’s *Platonic Terms*), is *unexpectedly* extant. And it indisputably means “nonexpectations” as the opposite of “expectations.” Once more, Dimoula was being bitterly ironic, and I refused to see it. This was clearly what one would call a hermeneutical bias (or, to put it bluntly, pure wish-

ful thinking): there would never be raining without rain; no shadow would ever return "a body to me" (behind this "me" hides the poet, the reader, and this most assiduous of readers, the translator).

Hats off to Rika Lesser, whose poetic instinct outdid both my knowledge of Greek and my unconscious wish for an improbable, un hoped-for resurrection.

It is in translation's honor that this fervent quest for a *meaningful* re-instantiation of meaning never ceased, and that it will certainly go on long after we hand this manuscript to the press. For I cannot but agree with George Steiner's ethical stance: "To re-create what has been created so as to affirm, to enunciate its primacy, its seniority of essence and existence, to re-create it in ways which add presentness to presence, which *ful-fil* that which is already complete: this is the purpose of responsible translation."

Kiki Dimoula's corpus up to 2010 encompasses more than four hundred poems, only about a hundred of which meet with her unequivocal approval. In making the selection for this volume, we felt that her preferences had to be respected, not only in deference to her wishes but also because they were a guide to what she herself considers worthy and most representative of her style. But we had other criteria. Quantity was an important issue—the book was to be bilingual, so there were space limitations. Translatability and readability also mattered. There are poems which are clearly not transposable to another language—the self-referential poems, in particular, whose subject is language itself, and where the signifier *is* the signified. Representativeness was a third. As this is the first comprehensive English translation of a wide selection of poems from across Dimoula's oeuvre, it was important to include poems illustrative of each phase of her work. Two early poems Dimoula had discarded were therefore added: "Melancholy" and "British Museum," from her first collection, *Erebus*. We also decided to include some beautiful poems that were inexplicably missing from the poet's personal canon, such

as "Montage" and "Common Fate" (*The Little of the World*), "Substitute" (*Hail Never*), and "Be Careful" (*We've Moved Next Door*). While these were added, others were abandoned for various reasons in the course of translation. Seventy-nine poems is our grand total (it could have been eighty, had not one of us believed that nine was her lucky number!). They are the product of two years' struggling, jubilating, fighting, discreetly crying, and loudly laughing. We offer them to our English readers with pride and gratitude.

The rest is poetry.

THE SOMATICS OF SEMANTICS

THE BODY OF THE WORK

Rika Lesser

What does it mean, to “know” a language? to “read” someone’s poetry? to “encounter great poetry”? And to recognize, or be cognizant of the fact that you have?

Draw a word out of the night
at random.

An entire night at random.

Don’t say “entire,”
say “tiny,”
which releases you.

Tiny
sensation,
entire
sadness
all mine.

An entire night.

Who would not be moved by the lapidary words above, a fragment chipped from “The Periphrastic Stone,” included in Kiki Dimoula’s 1971 breakthrough volume *The Little of the World*? Who would not feel their weight, their gravity, and be impressed by them? Or by these longer lines from “Lower Class,” a poem inspired by her visit to the sanctuary of Olympia, which appeared in *Oblivion’s Adolescence*, 1994:

Disproportion's civilizations and tombs
are topsy-turvy in my mind.
I forget in which of their annihilations
so many illustrious dates made their camps,
when power was proclaimed the ultimate goal,
I always confuse whatever happened prior to my existence
with as-if-it-hadn't-happened. After we cease to exist
mark my words
my confusion will prove prophetic.

I better comprehend
the stones scattered all around
as they were, anonymous, brought to light by the excavation,
parts of some wholeness—
no one knows which lower level
of earth it went under.
To me their lost meaning is familiar.
I comfort them by inscribing them
as the branches' faint movements inscribe
the scattered spring air.

The coincidence of weight and lightness, stillness and movement, presence and absence, time and space is uniquely Dimoula, while her discriminations, how she draws her boundaries, is eerily familiar. Compare Dimoula's "I always confuse whatever happened prior to my existence / with as-if-it-hadn't-happened" from the poem above with Rilke's "Not that you were frightened when you died, / nor that your strong death interrupted us / in darkness, tearing the Until-then from the Up-till-now" from his "Requiem for a Friend" for Paula Modersohn-Becker, written in 1908.

I would like to lie down on the floor with the poems of Kiki Dimoula. I have *learned to (re)write* streaming through me in all directions at once—in Greek and in English, in the poet's voice (which I have heard only in recordings), in my own, in the voice of my co-

translator (which I have heard live and recorded), all of which play in my head, have been playing in my head, since May 2010.

We learn by experience and experimentation, somatically as much as intellectually incorporating all we have attempted in our successes and failures. We can improve our skills and our lives if we allow ourselves to go on exploring, with curiosity, in a state of neutral and attentive open-mindedness. Call it negative capability. In this context I will call it "translator's brain holding various lingual possibilities simultaneously, spherically, and weighing them, undecided, in one or more languages under consideration." It is that moment in Paradise of sensing and feeling, before—in suspension of—judgment. A state of potentiality before action is taken. We train, in literature as in life, in many different ways, to be prepared to move, to take action in any direction at any time, as needed. Survival depends on it.

Whatever you tell the pen, it writes.
You think remember suppose love dictate.

Some things you pass over in silence.
["Painful Revelation"]

My imperfect knowledge of Kiki Dimoula's work I will pass over in silence. An account of how I came to translate her work follows.

It is no secret, or an open one, that I have long been opposed to translating poetry from languages one does not "know." For years I have spoken and written about translating and reading poets in translation, of having counted myself part of a dying breed of American Poet-Translators Who Translate Only from Languages They Know Intimately (or Extremely Well), and, while not predominantly scholars, who have no fear of scholarship. These are people for whom the translation of poetry is every bit as creative and essential to their "practice" as writing their own poems. This is fundamentally different from the practice of Scholars (American or not) Who Translate

Poetry, who tell you everything about the original poems, even how to sound out the original texts, but do not show you, do not provide you with poems that are a pleasure to read in English.

An American poet who grew up speaking only English but eager to learn other languages, I feel as closely related to Rilke — my first real love in another language — as I do to Dickinson. I may feel closer to Gunnar Ekelöf than to Pound. I have felt asymptotically close to Göran Sonnevi, whose work I have translated for more than twenty-five years, whose single long poem extends through all his books, whose language encompasses literature, science, philosophy, politics, and music. And I am just as near a relation of “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,” who walked these Brooklyn streets before me.

When approached about translating Kiki Dimoula’s poetry, many signals in my neurologically American system sounded alarms; lights went off and on, and on. Life knows no stasis. Over time many things had changed. Chief in my own biography and biology, after several years’ practice of tai chi chuan, I had begun to train as a *Feldenkrais* practitioner (an educational training often described as somatic). In waking life, sensitive to change, aware of locomotion, I move and breathe with a pulse, think rhythmically, cyclically, use language, work with language when necessary, when expedient. Writing poetry — nearly a lifelong practice for me — is a necessity. My intention? Life, with pleasure. As Wallace Stevens wrote to Henry Church, the man to whom he dedicated *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, “the essence of poetry is change and the essence of change is that it gives pleasure.”

The request came on May 3, 2010, from Jennifer Banks, who had been my editor on Sonnevi’s *Mozart’s Third Brain*. She wrote of Kiki Dimoula as an “astounding Greek poet”; she and Cecile Inglessis Margellos were looking for someone to serve as Cecile’s co-translator. I trusted her judgment — not my lack of Greek — because Jennifer had recognized Sonnevi’s “greatness”; her instincts and enthusiasm

helped me find him a home at Yale. It was not long before Cecile and I began our transoceanic work.

Because you associate
with suspect worlds
— especially that of the soul —
someday you'll be summoned by the police
for interrogation, identification.

Be careful
your confession
must be terse.
["I Do Not Know"]

Even before I began to learn the Greek alphabet, a twisted ball of Greek roots was available to me in the thesaurus at the base of English, howsoever confused as they wend through Latin or French. I knew from the first that the only way I could proceed was to attend to the poems read aloud. I had played the piano and studied voice in my youth and, as I have written elsewhere, had a quarter century of experience working with Göran Sonnevi's voice. I learned early and by heart that the center of the mind and the soul is the body.

Fortunately there is a Greek compact disc on which quite a few of the poems in this selection are recorded. Kiki Dimoula's voice is deep and dark, as is my co-translator's. Cecile recorded and sent me MP3 files of the remaining poems, spoken at normal rates and more slowly, so that I could hear the poems properly as well as follow every word on each page.

At first I received translations of the poems that hewed as closely to the Greek lineation as possible in addition to transcriptions of the Greek texts into the English alphabet, with interlinear word-for-word approximations. (At this point my recognition of Greek letters was limited to what I knew from chemistry and calculus.) Once I had learned the Greek alphabet, Cecile continued to supplement

her English drafts of the poems with something like word-for-word keys. But I also became proficient at keyboarding the poems, word by word, into Google-translate onscreen while listening to the recordings. The Google translations were dumbfounding, beyond oracular. But I needed to hear and feel and see the word boundaries as well as get the sense (semantic) and sensation (auditory and rhythmic) of every separate word.

I would also listen repeatedly to the poems in Greek while looking at the Greek text, marking it in pencil and colored markers—on photocopies rather than in the books—until I could distinguish all the words, hear similarities, repetitions. I needed to get the sense (semantic) and sensation (auditory and rhythmic) of the phrasing of the words in the sentences.

My co-translator and I exchanged countless drafts via e-mail, and we discussed poems—sometimes for hours on end—using Skype from variable locations. We would read versions to each other back and forth, discuss allusions, idioms, synonyms, etymologies, mutual misunderstandings, occasional successes. I printed out many drafts and marked the printouts. We discussed every word and line in detail, maddening for both of us.

Just after Hurricane Irene left New York on August 28, 2011, I left for Greece, and we worked together for a week or so, revisiting all we had done up until then—some forty-five poems—and going forward a bit. Between late September and late December, we worked even more intensively on the remaining thirty-four. Drafts of another handful or two were cast off along the way.

I have read other translations of Kiki Dimoula, not all that exist in all the languages I can read. Time was certainly a constraint—the desire to produce a book during the poet's lifetime. But it also became clear to me, as time went on and my understanding of Dimoula's *corpus* improved and deepened, and as I continued to consult various French and Swedish translations, that indeed Cecile Inglessis Margellos is the most exacting, the most devoted, the most faithful of

Dimoula's readers. We are all in her debt for bringing Kiki Dimoula to us. Without her intelligence, the poet's voice would still be dark smoky background music I might dance to.

Who now is the marionette and who pulls the strings? It gives me great joy once again lightly to tap out these words in these lines *translated* from the title poem of the poet's most recent volume, *The Finder's Reward*, 2010:

unread, the pages were secretly laughing
then you weighed them all in the palm of your hand
as if they were coins
and made a rough estimate
not so few, you said,
surprised, how did you come by them, you asked me.

Hypocrite, you haven't read a single line
or else you would have seen
it's the first thing I wrote

they're the finder's reward
you gave them to me
because I found you
.....
I didn't subtract a single one
of the thousand beauties you possessed
nor one speck of your precious ugliness
World.

ΜΕΛΑΓΧΟΛΙΑ

Στὸν οὐρανὸ ἀκροβατεῖ μεγάλη σκοτεινιά.
Κι ἔτσι καθὼς μὲ πῆρε τὸ παράθυρο ἀγκαλιά,
μὲ τὸ ἓνα χέρι
στὸ δωμάτιο μέσα σέρνω
τοῦ δρόμου τὴν ἀπίστευτη ἐρημιά,
μὲ τὸ ἄλλο παίρνω
μιὰ χούφτα συννεφιά
καὶ στὴν ψυχὴ μου σπέρνω.

MELANCHOLY

In the sky heavy darkness walks a tightrope.
And as the window takes me into its embrace,
with one of my hands
into the room I drag
the street's inconceivable barrenness,
while with the other one I grab
a handful of cloudmist
and with it seed my soul.

ΜΕΤΑΘΕΣΙΣ

Ἡ νύχτα ἐνταφιάζει ἀθόρυβα
στὸν τύμβο τῆς σιωπῆς της
τὸ σῶμα τῆς ἡμέρας,
τῆς μάνας τῶν ἔργων μου.

Κι ἐγώ, τὰ ὀρφανὰ κι ἀνήλικα
τοῦτα ἔργα μου
μαζεύω γύρω μου,
καὶ τὰ προετοιμάζω
γιὰ τὴν ἄγνωστη μητριά τους:
τὴν αὐριανὴν ἡμέρα.

TRANSFER

Night quietly buries
in its tomb of silence
today's body,
mother of my works.

And I, around myself,
I gather orphans and minors,
these works of mine,
getting them ready
for their unknown stepmother:
the day to come.

ΑΣΥΜΒΙΒΑΣΤΑ

Όλα τὰ ποιήματά μου γιὰ τὴν ἄνοιξη
ἀτέλειωτα μένουν.

Φταίει ποὺ πάντα βιάζεται ἡ ἄνοιξη,
φταίει ποὺ πάντα ἀργεῖ ἡ διάθεσή μου.

Γι' αὐτὸ ἀναγκάζομαι
κάθε σχεδὸν ποίημά μου γιὰ τὴν ἄνοιξη
μὲ μιὰ ἐποχὴ φθινοπώρου
ν' ἀποτελειώνω.

INCOMPATIBLES

All my poems about spring
remain incomplete.

Spring is always in a hurry,
my mood always long delayed.

That's why I'm compelled
to complete
almost every poem I write about spring
with an autumn season.

ΡΟΜΑΝΤΙΚΗ ΔΙΑΦΩΝΙΑ

Καὶ βέβαια εἶμαι
κατὰ τῆς διαταράξεως τῆς σελήνης.
Οἱ λόγοι πολλοί.
Ἐκτὸς ἀπ' τὴν κακόσχημιν ὑπερβολὴ
—ἐγὼ ἀπὸ καιρὸ τὶς ἀποφεύγω
λόγῳ ὑπερκοπώσεως—
εἶναι καὶ ἀπρέπεια.
Οἱ σχέσεις της μὲ τὴ γῆ
ὑπῆρξαν ἕως τώρα
ἄκρως τυπικές.
Διακριτικὴ μὲς στὴ μαγευτικὴ ἀπόστασή της,
ἔδωκε λύσεις ἄψογες
στῆς ἀνθρωπότητας τὴ ρέμβη.
Καί, τὸ κυριότερο,
δωρεὰν κάθε τόσο
αὐτὴ τὴν ἐφθαρμένην γῆ
ἐπαργυρώνει.

ROMANTIC DISAGREEMENT

Of course I am
against disturbing the moon.
For many reasons.
Not only is it an unseemly exaggeration
—personally I've long avoided exaggerating
because of exhaustion —
but it is also improper.
So far, the moon's relations with the earth
have been
highly formal.
Discreet from its enchanting distance,
it offered perfect solutions
to mankind's musing.
And, above all,
every so often,
it silver-plates
this worn-out earth for free.

ΔΥΟ ΜΙΚΡΑ ΠΟΙΗΜΑΤΑ

ΓΙΑ ΕΝΑ ΑΙΝΙΓΜΑ ΚΑΙ ΕΝΑ ΔΡΟΜΟ

I

Γιὰ σένα στὶς ἐπιθυμίες μου
λόγος δὲν ἔγινε ποτέ.
Δὲν σὲ προέβλεψαν ποτὲ
τὰ ὄνειρά μου.
Οἱ προαισθήσεις μου
δὲν σὲ συνάντησαν.
Οὔτε ἡ φαντασία μου.

Κι ὅμως

μὴ ἀνεξακρίβωτη στιγμή
σ' ἐξακριβώνω μέσα μου
ἓνα ἔτοιμο κιόλας αἶσθημα.

II

Πλατιὰ ποὺ ἦταν ἡ Σταδίου
καθὼς χωροῦσε
τὸ μεσημέρι τὸ εὖχυμο,
τὸν ἀνδρισμό σου,
καὶ μένα
βαδίζοντας πλάι σου
σὲ ἀπόσταση
μὴς ὁλόκληρης θλίψης.

**TWO SHORT POEMS
FOR A RIDDLE AND A STREET**

I

My desires were never
told about you.
You were never predicted
by my dreams.
My premonitions
haven't met you.
Nor has my imagination.
And yet
for an indeterminate moment
I determine that you're inside me:
a feeling already ready.

II

So vast was Stadiou Street
with room enough
for succulent noon,
your virility,
and me
walking beside you
one whole sadness
apart.