



ADONIS

# The Pages of Day and Night

*translated from the arabic by samuel hazo*

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THE PAGES  
OF  
DAY AND NIGHT

TRANSLATED FROM THE ARABIC  
BY SAMUEL HAZO



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Samuel Hazo

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## THE PAGES OF DAY AND NIGHT

1.

I write in a language that exiles me. The relationship of an Arab poet to his language is like that of a mother who gives away her son after the first stirrings in her body. If we accept the biblical story of Hagar and Ishmael, as repeated in the Koran, we realize that maternity, paternity and even language itself were all born in exile for the Arab poet. Exile is his mother-country, according to this story. For him it can be said: in the beginning was the exile, not the word. In his struggle against the hell of daily life, the Arab poet's only shelter is the hell of exile.

2.

What I have just said returns us to origins—to myth and to language. Based on these origins, Islam offered a new beginning. It dislodged language from its worldly exile and oriented it to the country of Revelation—to heaven. Through language Revelation reveals the metaphysical while work organizes the physical. This organization has been entrusted to man as the new caliph—the successor of the Prophet. Revelation was instituted at the moment man accepted the charge of putting it into practice. Then it became a law, a system.

Yet in every system there exists another form of exile because every system is both a limitation and a route planned in advance. Every system forces man out of his being and identifies him with his appearance.

Thus, Arab life from its inception has been an exile from language and the religious system. In the past as well as in the present, the Arab poet has known many other forms of exile as well: censorship, interdiction, expulsion, imprisonment and murder.

In this scenario the Other seems to be the salvation of the I. The Other is neither past nor future, nor is it a mirror that is capable of returning the I to childhood. Rather it helps to set the poet in motion toward the unknown, toward everything strange.

From such a perspective, poetry is certainly not a “paradise lost” nor is it a “golden age.” On the contrary it is a question that begets another question. Considered as a question, the Other concurs with the I who is actually living the exile of the answer. Therefore, the Other is a constitutive part of the answer—the element of knowledge and Revelation. It is as if the Other is the impulse of the question within the I.

The Other has been omnipresent in the creative experience of Arabic poetry. Because the language the Arab poet uses contains many languages, old and new, Arabic, poetically speaking, is plural but in singular form.

But whether in practice or in its contacts with the aforementioned system, the Arabic language has nothing more to tell us. Rather it has become a language of silence, or rather it tends to reduce expression to silence. Its orbit is muteness, not diction. The Other, the Western persona in this instance, is transformed in his relationship to the Arab poet into a limitation and a chain, at least in reference to the system. He may be content with his own freedom within his own limits. Perhaps he may see nothing in the Arabic past but the answer to a question he knows in advance since he devised the question out of his own imagination, need and interest.

This may explain why the Arab poet embodies a double absence—an absence from himself as well as an absence from the Other. He lives between these two exiles: the internal one and the external one. To paraphrase Sartre, he lives between two hells: the I and the Other.

The I is not I, nor is it the Other.

Absence and exile constitute the only presence.

Being a poet means that I have already written but that I have actually written nothing. Poetry is an act without a beginning or an end. It is really a promise of a beginning, a perpetual beginning.

---

To be means to mean something. Meanings are only apprehended through words. I speak; therefore, I am. My existence thus and then assumes meaning. It is through this distance and hope that the Arab poet attempts to speak, i.e., to write, to begin.

But, between the two exiles I have mentioned, is a beginning really possible?

And, before all else, what is such a beginning?

I ask this question so I can answer it indirectly by saying that the Arabic language was and is a constant attempt to establish a beginning which cannot be established because its establishment seems impossible.

And since poetry by definition is on the side of presence, the Arab poet cannot live nor can he write within the illusion of a possible foundation. In his life and language, the Arab poet thus speaks ever of freedom and democracy as illusions.

I say *illusion* because life itself comes before freedom and democracy. How can I possibly talk about life when I am prevented from being myself, when I am not living, neither within myself nor for myself, when I am not even living for the Other?

The problem of freedom for the Arab poet (unlike his Other, his western counterpart) does not reside in the awakening of individuality or in the partial or total absence of democracy and human rights. Rather the problem resides in what is deeper, more remote and complex because, ironically, it is simpler. It resides in the primitive and primordial. It resides in man's original exile, in what constitutes and is constituted, in the No of what orders and prohibits. This is the No that not only creates culture but also creates man and life itself.

5.

Institutionalized language overflows the I and the Other and shakes the very foundations of freedom and democracy. It is the language of death and massacre where both the I and the Other discover their deaths.

Death sees nothing but death. The I that is already dead cannot

accept the Other but will only see him in his own image, which is the image of death. Our poetry at present seems to be moving within this kind of death.

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Adonis  
Paris, 9/3/92

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THE PASSAGE

I sought to share  
the life of snow  
and fire.

    But neither  
snow nor fire  
took me in.

    So  
I kept my peace,  
waiting like flowers,  
staying like stones.  
In love I lost  
myself.

    I broke away  
and watched until  
I swayed like a wave  
between the life  
I dreamed and the changing  
dream I lived.

THE DAYS

My eyes are tired, tired of days,  
tired regardless of days.  
Still, must I drill  
through wall after wall  
of days to seek another day  
Is there? Is there another day?

THE WANDERER

---

A wanderer, I make a prayer  
of dust.

Exiled, I sing  
my soul until the world  
burns to my chants  
as to a miracle.

Thus am I  
risen.

Thus I am redeemed.

THE MARK OF SISYPHUS

Others I know. Against  
them I fling the penance  
of this rock before I turn  
to face the time to come.  
The innocent years revolve  
like life within a womb.

I see in the west a light  
of green frontiers where I  
may never find my other  
self. I turn from men,  
shoulder tomorrow's sun  
and bear it forward to heaven.

---

THE SLEEP OF HANDS

Today I offer my palms  
to dead lands and muted  
streets before death seams  
my eyelids, sews me  
in the skin of all the earth  
and sleeps forever in my hands.

UNDERGROUND

The presence of cities  
passed between the lashes  
of our eyes.

    Behind  
our faces' counterfaces,  
we shouted like the lost,  
"In every city's catacombs  
we live like snails  
within their shells

    O cities  
of rejection, come!  
Discover us!"

TREE OF FIRE

---

The tree by the river  
is weeping leaves.  
It strews the shore  
with tear after tear.  
It reads to the river  
its prophecy of fire.  
I am that final  
leaf that no one  
sees.

My people  
have died as fires  
die—without a trace.

THE CAPTIVE

Imprisoned by the buds and grass,  
I build an island in my mind  
by weaving branches from a shore.  
Harbors dissolve. Black lines  
unweave themselves. I pass

between the barriers and springs  
of light that made my dream.  
I feel the jailed astonishment  
of every butterfly that falters  
in a fluttering of dying wings.

---

HUNGER

The hungry planted a forest  
where weeping became trees,  
and branches . . . a country  
for women in labor.

A harvest of unborn children  
grew like buds from the bed  
of this the universe.  
The forest turned to ashes

with their cries that came  
as if from towers of disaster  
bearing the small, starved voices  
accusing, accusing, accusing.

Listen

Let me tell  
you my dream.

I saw  
a child driving the wind  
and stones as if through water.  
Under the water were bounties  
locked as kernels are locked  
in a rush of becoming.  
But why did I sorrow like hymns  
from the kingdom of famine  
and tears?

Listen!  
I'm calling you to recognize my  
voice.

I am your  
prodigal brother riding  
the stallion of death to find  
the door marked destiny.

---

THE PAST

Each day is a child  
who dies behind a wall  
turning its face to the wall's  
corners.

Houses flee  
before its ghost that rises  
from the grave demanding  
vengeance.

Not from eternity  
but from a bitter land  
it comes, fleeing as if from bullets  
through the town, the public  
squares, the houses of the poor.  
From the desert it comes,  
and on its face is the hunger  
of pigeons and parching flowers.

Through overnetting clouds  
plunged two stars.  
I stopped and bowed,  
acknowledging their greeting.  
Still the palm tree  
shook and shook  
its sculpted leaves like some  
old scribe of sorrow,  
now moved, now  
chosen to record and see  
(within the barriers  
that no one sees)  
how space begins with trees  
and how, above  
them to the stars  
. . . only the wind, the wind, the wind.

---

THE CALL

My morning love,  
meet me in the sad field.  
Meet me on the road  
where the dried trees  
shielded us like children  
under their dried shadows.

Do you see the branches?  
Do you hear the call  
of the branches?  
Their young shoots are words  
that strengthen my eyes  
with a strength  
that can split stone.

Meet me. Meet me,  
as if we had already dressed  
and come and knocked  
on the woven door of darkness,  
parted a curtain,  
flung windows open  
and retreated to the sinuosities  
of branches—  
as if we had poured  
from the brims of our eyelids  
such dreams, such tears—  
as if we had stayed  
in a country of branches  
and never chose to return.

Leave me alone.  
Let birds come.  
Let stones be laid on stones.  
Leave me alone.  
I waken streets  
when I walk through processions  
of trees.

    Under branches  
I remember journeys  
when I rose to foreign  
suns and let the morning  
seal my secrets.  
Leave me alone.  
A light has always  
led me home.  
A voice is always calling.

---

THE PAGES OF DAY AND NIGHT

Before the time of day—I am.  
Before the wonder of the sun—I burn.  
Trees run behind me.  
Blossoms walk in my shadow.  
But still tomorrow  
builds into my face  
such island fortresses  
of silence that words find  
not a door to enter by.  
The pitying stars ignite  
and days forget themselves  
in my bed.

    The springs within my chest  
are closing now like blossoms  
to the moon.

    Their waters bathe  
the mirror of my vision pure  
as silence as I waken into sleep.

I carry no sword.  
I've never sculpted a head.  
In summer and winter  
I am a bird fleeing  
in a torrent of hunger  
to an empty nest.

My kingdom is a road  
of water.  
In every absence I am present.  
In pain or shyness,  
in rain or dryness,  
far or near—  
I possess the light of things.

And when I go,  
I close the door of the earth  
behind me.

1. *The Wave*

Khalida,  
you are a branch in leaf—  
a voyage that drowns each day  
in the fountains of your eyes—  
a wave that helps me see  
how starlight,  
clouds  
and sands beneath a wind  
are one.

2. *Underwater*

We sleep beneath a cloth  
woven from the harvests  
of the night.  
O night of dust . . .  
Cymbals and alleluias  
chorus  
in our blood.  
Underwater suns  
glitter  
the dark to dawn.

3. *Lost*

. . . once,  
encircled by your arms,  
I lost my way.  
My lips were fortresses  
succumbing to a conquest  
they desired.  
Nearer,  
nearer you breathed,  
your waist—a sultan,

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