



ADONIS

The Pages of Day and Night

translated from the arabic by samuel hazo

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OF
DAY AND NIGHT

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BY SAMUEL HAZO



THE MARLBORO PRESS / NORTHWESTERN
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS
EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

The Marlboro Press/Northwestern
Northwestern University Press
www.nupress.northwestern.edu

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

ISBN-13: 978-0-8101-6081-1

ISBN-10: 0-8101-6081-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Adonis, 1930—

[Poems. English. Selections]

The pages of day and night / Adonis ; translated from the Arabic by Samuel Hazo.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-8101-6081-1 (alk. paper)

I. Hazo, Samuel John. II. Title.

PJ7862.A519 A24 2000

892.7'16—dc21

00-056638

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

NOTE

I would like to thank Mirene Ghossein, Kamal Boullata and Antoinette Tuma for providing the literal translations from the Arabic that were the basis for my final transversions, Bradford Morrow for permitting me to reprint as an appendix Esther Allen's translation from the French of Adonis' "Poetry and Apoetical Culture" (CONJUNCTIONS, 19), Austryn Wainhouse for suggesting the final scope of this book and, finally, Adonis himself for his friendship and cooperation. I hope that these versions of his work further enhance his deserved reputation as one of the leading poets (if not the leading poet) in the Arab world today.

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.

Adonis
Paris, 9/3/92

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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