

Poetry Flash

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When Language Fails

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Because language relies upon our experience of each word in order to convey meaning, if there were a perfect form of communication, language would not be it. The initial failure to adequately express one's experience is magnified by the gaps in the experience of one's audience. And so, we either pore laboriously over a text trying to equate its vocabulary with our own lives; or we abandon ourselves to some imperfect sense of the author's meaning.

Poets may write intuitively in a way which is both expressive and accessible. But once the Pandora's Box of meaning has been opened, the contents are no longer content to be mere content.

Etel Adnan has always grappled with language and expression. The child of a Greek mother and a Syrian father, Adnan was born into the Arabic/European collage of Lebanon; later, she studied in France and taught in the United States. Adnan has lived in the plurality of multilingualism, where ideas are moulded by the language in which they are conceived.

In each of her books, Adnan has used the 'how' of expression to reflect the marriage of word and idea. In her novel, *Sitt Marie Rose*, for example, the narrative is carried through seven distinct voices, thereby transcending the personal and the tribal biases built into the argots and idioms of the singular (one man's terrorist is another man's freedom-fighter).

The Arab Apocalypse is, to date, Adnan's most triumphant battle with the exactness of words. And a battle it is, underlining its subject matter, the civil war in Beirut. Originally written in French, *The Arab Apocalypse* is Adnan's own translation of a series of poems chronicling the start of Beirut's interminable fall.

Such monstrous material seems difficult to approach in itself. But then, the added consideration which both the poet and the poet-as-translator must accord to language amplifies the task to a level of near impossibility. How can the art of poetry reconcile itself to the war's destructive rumble?

The solution, for Adnan, is dissolution. So skilled a poet as she has proven to be could easily have fashioned pedantry or polemic in the pedestrian style of politicized contemporaries. Instead, Adnan allows the process—the battle with conveying meaning—to reflect the barbarous object—the battle in the streets. The conflict becomes both external and internal, as in civil war; there is no voice of reason to make order out of chaos.

The poetry unfolds quite romantically, like an old map at the beginning of an epic or a picnic napkin laid upon the lawn in the era when wars drew spectators. As if invoking her muse, Adnan sets out a song to the sun: “A solar arrow crosses the sky An eye dreads the sun the sun is an eye/ A tubular sun haunted by the tubes of the sea...” The tone is playful, soothing, melodious. Then, quickly, it is night—“The night of the non-event. War in the vacant sky.” A funeral procession announces the coming turmoil.

The sun continues to cross each page, just as it crosses the sky becoming the only constant in a world gone to bedlam. Sense is fragmented. Often language fails altogether, and these places are marked in the text by small glyphs from the author’s pen—naked symbols or glottal punctuation, they serve to heighten the immediacy of response in the act of being formulated.

The poetry is also full of “shrieks and silences.”

Where do you want ghosts to reside?
In our wakeful hours there are flowers which
We burned continents of silence the future
 of nations
the breathing of the fighters got thicker became
 like oxen’s

there is in that breath sparkles of scorched flesh
 and the fainting of stars

we crucify Gilgamesh on a TANK Viking II
 reaches Mars
Imam Ali dances over a nuclear blast
cursed are the clouds which repel { CONTACT_Con-3E07000A8 }
cursed are the Arabs who fell tall and haggard
 eucalyptus trees

As if in some telegram of ominous news, the poetry repeatedly punctuates itself with “STOP,” and we know, too, that this is a supplication or directive; it is our own conscience and also the thick voice of death.

Adnan's lines are inordinately long; they refuse to be tamed by standards of reasonable length. But then, this is not a place for reason. The lines stretch before one's eyes almost without limit, uncontained and excruciatingly unpredictable. War is not confined; it too reaches beyond our abilities to comprehend.

As in any modern apocalypse, survivors do not figure into the end. Only the sun continues on its course.

Adnan's style is complex and her language is precise; the poetry is difficult, but it is never inaccessible. On the contrary, the images are so well-chosen and immaculately polished that they linger in the reader's mind long after one has reached the end. The lines, indeed, stretch beyond themselves into the expanse of imagination.

Adnan's wrestling match with verbal expression serves to underline the irony that such diverse cultural and spiritual influences as those in the Middle East could produce magnificent poetry on the one hand while provoking the destruction of warfare on the other. And if the poetry seems at times discordant, one need only remember that it was the goddess of Discord herself who caused the quarrel which led to the Trojan War.