

“Time”, a poem by Adonis (with commentary by Sam Liebhaber)

Watch recitation here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_JDlws9Dow

1. Carrying the seeds of time my head a tower of fire:
2. what is this blood sinking deep into the sand, what is this decline?
3. Tell us, O flames of the present, what shall we say?

4. The tatters of history in my throat
5. on my face the victim’s scars
6. how unavailing has language become how narrow the alphabet’s doors.

7. Carrying the seeds of time, my head a tower of fire:
8. ...has a friend become a hangman? has a neighbor
9. said: How slow is Hulagu? Who knocks at the door? A tax collector?

10. Pay him his ransom...forms of men
11. and women...walking puppets/we pointed at them
12. we whispered: our steps
13. a path of killing/
14. is your killing commanded by your God I wonder
15. or is God born of your killing?

16. Confused by the riddles
17. he bent a bow of terror over his bent days.

(translated by Mona Amyuni, *Journal of Arabic Literature* vol. 21 no. 2 [1990]: pp. 172-182)

Comments:

Line 1: What is fire here? What does it evoke? The cleansing fire of al-Bayati? Rage?

Line 2: Blood and decline – what does this refer to? Sense of doom and despair at state of political and social affairs in Arab world in the 20th century?

Line 3: “Flames of the present” – what is the relationship of these flames to “fire” in line 1? An oracle? In line 1, reader gets the sense that the fire represents the poet’s own passion and rage; here, the flames might reference the destructive furies unleashed in 20th century, or in another reading, the flames/fire of wisdom. Also, note that the poet is addressing the flames, not the reader or audience. This gives the poem its lyric tone, its “aspiration to the sublime” (see Culler pp. 76-77).

Line 4: “Tatters of history” – evokes the Arab Modernist interest in Arab/Near Eastern history, but in a negative mode (rather than a heroic one – see Jayyusi, p. 25)

Line 6: Language (poetic language) no longer serves its purpose, the oratorical modes of neo-classicism unsuited to modern age: “[Adonis] broke the neck of logic” (Jayyusi, p. 27), “[Adonis] shunned direct statement and invested his language with mystery, obliquity, and connotativeness”.

Line 8: Modern era brings about contradictory, illogical relationships (political, social and

otherwise), profound confusion with respect to former sources of authority, comfort, and kinship.

Line 9: Who is Hulagu? (Mongol who ransacked Baghdad in the 13th century); Why is he mentioned here? But Hulagu is slow...he has turned into a “tax collector”: a venal evil, who slowly sucks the vitality out of life, but no less destructive than Hulagu in the end. =The grinding misery of the present age, rather than cataclysmic destruction?

Line 14-15: Questions authority/existence of God; no authority, assumption, or institution is free from critique amongst the modern poets (see Jayyusi, p. ?)

Line 16-17: Poem ends on a note of befuddlement, despair and terror; no hope in the post-1967 world.