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Thinking About the World with Poems

Alain Badiou, *The Age of the Poets: And Other Writings on Twentieth-Century Poetry and Prose*, trans. Bruno Bosteels, Verso, 2014, 252 pp., \$24.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781781685693.

Judith Balso, *Affirmation of Poetry*, trans. Drew S. Burk, Univocal, 2014, 107 pp., \$22.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781937561178.

In the afterword to her book *The Affirmation of Poetry*, Judith Balso, echoing Alberto Caero, maintains that reading poetry is entering into the “apprenticeship of unlearning” (98). Poetry undermines language and its familiar figures of rhetoric, replacing them with what Balso suggests calling “figures of thought” (100). Her book is a short, intense and intimate argument for poetry as a means for thinking about, being in, and seeing the world. It is an affirmation, not of the importance, relevance, or even necessity of poetry, but of the undisputed power of poetry to short circuit all categories of knowledge and arrive at or reveal the very forms of our thought. Poetry, she contends, does not tell us something but rather shows us how to think about all things.

Balso’s book is gripping in its energy and its dedication to the cause of poetry. It is obvious from the translation that the language Balso uses to present her “declaration regarding the power of poetic work” (9) is in itself poetic, purely and simply available, to borrow from Paul Celan. And what better way to affirm poetry than with a critical language that does not labor or struggle but simply signals and shows. For this reason, I think we must acknowledge and give due credit to Drew S. Burk whose translation succeeds in presenting Balso’s ideas lucidly, while maintaining that composed yet burning force that drives and organizes them.

But before I go forward with a detailed discussion of Balso’s book, I would like to pave the way with some ideas borrowed from Alain Badiou’s work, especially his exploration of “what poetry thinks” and his notion of the “the age of poets” as found in a collection of essays published in English around the same time as Balso’s book under the title, *The Age of the Poets*. The essays are divided into two parts: On Poetry and On Prose. I will not discuss this book in too much detail here, but it is worth noting that the essays included in this volume have not been translated before, some of them, even, have not been published in French yet. The volume as a whole presents Badiou’s philosophical analyses centered around two main polemics. The first is the idea of the “age of poets”—the relationship between

poetry and philosophy building upon Heidegger's exploration of that link. The second looks at the place and role of literature in the wake of the break between science and ideology, associated with the work of Althusser and his disciples. What interests me here is the first polemic and particularly Badiou's notion of the "age of poets" which obviously informs Balso's book.

The "age of poets" is not a historicist category, as Badiou states, but rather a philosophical one. When philosophy is subjected to one of its conditions—the scientific, the political, or the combination of the two such as the Marxist notion of scientific socialism—it becomes sutured or paralyzed (4). Suture, in the sense Badiou uses it here, is when all the energies of philosophy are slanted towards or delegated to one of its conditions. This is the moment when poetry assumes the vacant operations of thinking (4). The poem becomes, not the site of thought, but thought itself. The poem that makes up the "age of poets," as Badiou sees it, is a "form of thought" and, more originally, "the song of thought" (26). He goes on to further clarify what that means by referring to the case of translation. A great poem "allows itself to be translated," he claims, because at its core, after the loss of all the music, after the linguistic ruin that is translation, a voice still remains. He calls it the musician's silence that endures. It is beyond language and its textures, it is a "form of thought" (28).

Along the same line, Balso proposes a principle of reading poems by which they are not the object of thought but the means of it. She describes her principle for reading as "poetic events": "events of thought whose site comprised of one or several poems or better still a poetic configuration constituted of the works of several poets" (16). She, in other words, presents to us her take on Badiou's "age of poets," engaging some of the same poets he discusses in his collection of essays (Caeiro, Mandelstam, Stevens, and Pasolini). What brings both Balso's and Badiou's constellation of poets together is their ability to demonstrate the power of poetry to build new un-borrowed avenues for thought that can perform the function of philosophy, while not reducing either to the other. Deconstructing the dichotomy of poetry and philosophy explored by Heidegger, Badiou's work, and consequently Balso's, demonstrates how poetry and philosophy are not dependent on each other nor should they ever be confused with each other; however, both can assume the operations of thinking, each presenting a separate ontology. Each of them can address the essential question of "thinking about being" separately. Poetry can offer its own answer to that fundamental question; an answer distinct from that of philosophy and also distinct from answers produced by metaphysics (23).

In *Affirmation of Poetry* Balso presents seven such "events of thought" initiated by seven different poets or group of poets writing in five different languages: Wallace Stevens, Alberto Caeiro, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Osip Mandelstam, Gennadiy Aygi, the Misty Poets, and Giacomo Leopardi. In each chapter Balso identifies in the work of the poet or poets at hand the models of poems that can be avenues for a poetic ontology.

Wallace Stevens's poetic event is the "poem of the act of the mind" (25). It is the archway between reality and imagination where the two are equals, one creating the other. With Stevens, as well as all of the other poets Balso discusses in the book, poetry is contrasted with philosophy thereby opening up the possibility of a poetic ontology—a poetic un-borrowed worldview (23). Stevens is an example of a poet who is aware of himself as being "always at the end of an era" (21)—at the cusp of a new one, a new world, a new reality. And, the poetry of thought is always pushing the limits of what we think as reality and expanding it. It is the poem that teaches us that reality is not necessarily "a solid," but possibly "a shade that traverses" (24).

In the poetic event of Caeiro, Balso shows that even the poem of non-thought, the poem of “seeing and not thinking” (37), is still a means by which poetry allows us to escape metaphysics and come closer to realizing that, as Caeiro puts it, “to exist is enough to be complete” (45). With Mandelstam Balso shows us the poem-plow. Mandelstam explores the relationship of poetry and history, or better yet, the ability of poetry to always propose an alternate history. To him, poetry is the force that can turn the matted soil of history, bringing up the hidden, the suppressed, and the marginalized. Poetry makes history a constant uncovering of the unknown. For the poet’s purpose, after all, is to find a way to “exhaust the burden of time, its fever” (49).

In the work of Pasolini, the poem ultimately strives to become the herald of a new world. It is resistance to all state political categories. It is the “consciousness of the sun” or “pure light” that exposes what is officially hidden, suppressed, and denied. Poetry here is a new form of political action, it is as spontaneous, necessary, unhindered, unorganized as is pure light. Pasolini then adds to that idea of “pure light”: the potential of unlocking a new world, a new reality, and that is when pure light can turn into an “uncertain daybreak” (60).

The Misty poets, the post-cultural revolution generation of Chinese “Menglong” poets, present us with the “I do not believe” poem. Mainly, their disbelief, or refusal to believe, concerns history. However, declaring lack of belief in history, results in a rejection of the worn-out language that history hands down. These poets struggle with a heavy, oppressive shared history and they resist it through individuality and with lyricism, but not in a romantic sense. It is an impersonal lyricism; a lyricism whose utmost rebellion and power lies not in expression but rather in thinking (72). These are the poets who declare in Bei Dao’s voice: “I tell you, world. I do not believe. I do not believe the sky is blue...” (69).

Aygi’s poem is the poem of silence. It seeks out the “color of universality” by which all the things inscribed in the poem acquire a universal general quality. However, this lack of particularity is not abstraction; it is not a search for pure concept but for a liberating radiance that allows poetry to grasp at the core of shared existence. The poet works as “the snow works in the field” (79), revealing the universality present in the world. And finally, Leopardi’s poem is the poem of retreat, the poem of distance that allows for imagination and thought against the dominant currents. It is a poem that allows us to see the world with the eyes of a boy who gazes “like a raw young lover” while “he, in his own imagination, is creating” (89).

Reading through Balso’s book, and through the different thought-poems she presents, I found myself thinking of a constellation of Arab poets, not all of them contemporaries, not all of the same poetic project, but all of them “modernists,” especially if we were to understand the modern poem as Badiou describes it:

...the modern poem identifies itself as thought. It is not only the effectiveness of a form of thinking proffered in the flesh of words; it is also the set of operations by which this thinking thinks of itself. (49)

Thus, they are modernist in that their poem, regardless of music, prosody, or ideas, strikes at the very forms of thought and strives to transform them. This constellation perhaps constitutes an “age of poets”; an age that begins with Bashshar ibn Burd (d. 784) and ends with al-Ma‘arri (d. 1057). The poetry of these poets has often been described as abstract, cerebral, modernist, or even philosophical, especially when the connection with Mu‘tazilite thought or Aristotelian philosophy is emphasized. But reflecting upon their work in light of

Balso's and Badiou's works allows us to rescue their poetic voices from the historicist approach that always pushes them back, excluding them from the discourse on modernism in general. Beyond the Abbasid modernist (*mubdath*) project which offered poetry that obviously "thinks of itself," this "age of poets" is an age of Arabic poetry of thought—a poetry that uses the scaffold of the archetypal *qasidah* in terms of prosody and structure, seemingly preserving the classical poetic form, but almost always making a drastic leap and building entirely unprecedented forms of thought.

One example of such a leap is a line from Bashshar ibn Burd, named by many poets and critics, the father of modernism in Arabic poetry.¹ Describing the pearls of poetry leaving the poet's mouth, Bashshar says:

They come out of his mouth and unto the gathered audience
As the light of the lantern comes out of its flame.²

Bashshar here is talking about a poetic language not in need of art or craft; it simply takes place, as Balso states at the very beginning of her book when describing the power of poetry (9). It radiates out of flame, transforming fire into light.

In a seemingly traditional boast (*fakhr*) poem, the Abbasid poet Abu Tammam resorts to the convention of bragging about his poetic abilities—a convention that goes back to his Pre-Islamic forefathers and their Islamic heirs, great poets such as 'Antarah ibn Shaddad, al-A'sha, Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, and Tamim ibn Muqbil, among others. However, when Abu Tammam does it, something entirely different takes place. He says:

I have unveiled the clear face of poetry
And let it loose from its coop.

With virgin lines that are seen with the ears.
To them the reasonable draws near no matter how far.

When they are recited to him, he wishes
All the parts of his body were but ears.³

Beyond revealing a critical sensitivity or attitude that I have called elsewhere highly meta-poetic,⁴ Abu Tammam here presents us with thinking poetry. He is aware of his modernizing project; he refers to it and comments on its consequences. In that sense his poetry is a (thinking) poetry that thinks about itself. Furthermore, and more relevant in this context, it is poetry that shocks and flaunts itself not only with its language and images, not only with its use of figures of speech, but beyond that in its ability to present to us "figures of thought." The experience of listening is altered; the exercise of receiving poetry is transformed. Another striking example from Abu Tammam appears in the most unexpected of places. In

¹ Adunis, *Muqaddimah lil-Sbi'r al-'Arabi* (Introduction to Arabic Poetry), 3rd Edition (Beirut: Dar 'Awdah, Beirut, 1979), 41-42.

² Bashshar ibn Burd, *Divan Bashshar ibn Burd*, ed. Al-Tahir ibn 'Ashur, 4 vols. (Cairo: Lajnat al-Talif wa al-Tarjamah wa al-Nashr, 1950), 1:159.

³ Abu Tammam, *Divan Abu Tammam*, ed. Muhyi al-din, 2 vols. (Beirut, Dar Sadir, 1997), 2:485.

⁴ See: Huda Fakhreddine, *Metapoesis in the Arabic Tradition: From Modernist to Mubdathun* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

a short invective in which he attacks an unknown person, most probably after a personal quarrel, he writes the following line:

Granted, he who has something strives to veil it,
Why do I see here nothing veiled?⁵

The category of “nothing” is transformed into something. Abu Tammam does not merely say, there is nothing behind the veil, but rather tells his opponent: when you sit in your house, you are nothing sitting behind a veil—“a door that opens unto a desert.”⁶ Beyond being a devastating attack on the man, this line lays bare the forms of thought that are at the core of the modernist project in Arabic poetry. This line of poetry is a thought and it certainly lets itself be translated. At its core is the form of a thought which launches us into the apprenticeship of unlearning. What is unlearned is not only what we thought we knew about something and nothing (i.e., “reality”), but also what we thought a line of poetry, metered and rhymed into a structure of lines, can do when it thinks.

Balso ends her book by revisiting Wallace Stevens’s notion of poetry as “supreme fictions.” The poet is a “fictioneer, a creator of supreme fictions without which we are incapable of conceiving our world” (95). Poetry has the ability to transform the category of truth, operating not only on the level of form, language, or thought, but in a manner that is constantly reinventing reality and pushing out the edges of time. In the words of Wallace Stevens, poets have the ability to think “without final thoughts,” and it is in this lack of finality, this openness of thought, that they give rise to ever new universes. The Arab poets I would like to think of as an “age of poets” and their twentieth century heirs are poets who primarily resisted the finality of thought and composed a poetry that has the power to blur the edges of everything—thoughts, sounds, and especially categories of thought. With Balso’s perspective, we can see this poetry not only as a poetry thinking of itself as poetry but more generally poetry of thought, a poetry that thinks and transforms.

We can hardly talk of an Arabic philosophy without quickly thinking of sutures, which leads me to say that poetry in Arabic has often assumed the operations of thinking, and especially in the “age of poets” from Bashshar to al-Ma‘arri, names including Abu Tammam, al-Buhturi, Ibn al-Rumi, and al-Mutanabbi. They offer poetic events—events of thought—which if we were to truly understand them as such, we would have a clearer more focused view of the modernist project in Arabic poetry, not only in its Abbasid phase, but more urgently in the twentieth century and beyond. The modern Arabic poem of the twentieth century Free Verse movement and its unfolding, which we are still witnessing today, is the product of the new avenues of poetry and more essentially the avenues of thought, paved by the Arab “age of poets.” It is a poem, like Mandelstam’s poem-plow, that recasts history, turning it inside out; a poem like Pasolini’s “uncertain daybreak,” seeking to make a new reality. We hear that in Adunis’s voice when he declares:

Today I have a language of my own
I have my borders, my land, and my color
I have peoples that sustain me with their confusion
And are guided by my ruins and wings.⁷

⁵ Abu Tammam, 2:204.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Adunis, *Aghani Mihyaral-Dimashqi*, 2nd Edition (Beirut: Manshurat Mawaqif, 1970), 81.

This “sustaining confusion” is the very medium of the poetry of thought that, as Stevens sees it, is constantly on the verge of a new beginning, pulling both reality and imagination out of their usual places. The achievement of the modern Arabic poem (or poems) is not in liberating itself from meter or rhyme, nor is it in tapping into themes unexplored before. Its achievement is that it can think and transform the familiar and the mundane into *fitnah*, that which shocks, amazes, and subverts. We can only appreciate that achievement if we learn to listen to the poem think.

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