

Andrée Chedid, Vénus Khoury-Ghata,
and Martine Broda

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Translated from the French by Michael Bishop

I would like to present three poets who are very different in age and writing style, Andrée Chedid, Vénus Khoury-Ghata and Martine Broda, in order to show the diversity of paths opened up by a women's poetry to which criticism and anthologies still give too small a place in France.¹

With the first two poets mentioned, I am also eager to speak of the Francophone world of the Middle East, today in regression and perhaps heading for erasure, yet so significant in our literature. There is something particularly simple and direct in the language of both these poets, that reminds us how natural poetry is in the countries where Arabic is spoken. But it is their only (and significant) point of resemblance. To read them is to realize that, both having come to France after living to adulthood in their first homeland, they have perceived the way they belong to two cultures, two countries, very differently.

Andrée Chedid, born in Cairo, did not arrive in Paris until the age of twenty-six. She then felt in her mode of being in the world, one of her favorite expressions, the work not of a rending exile, but of a broadening of her sensibility, a dual sense of belonging which she extends to the perception of a universality. This dual sense of belonging is in our very nature, and the experience of geographic change serves to better apprehend it. One would therefore be mistaken in giving to the title of one of her

collections, *Double pays (Double Country)*, a purely local meaning.

The double country is ourselves, endlessly swinging between shadow and light, between existential problem and happiness. It is thus that recourse to language may be explained, because our “being in the world” is “what is more than language / but which language sets free” (*Poèmes pour un texte* 56).²

Poetry: a constant exercise of maturation and balance, necessary in order to attain a wisdom identifying the human being with the movement of the earth itself ceaselessly divided and reunified. “I have seasons in blood,” Andrée Chedid affirms, and the continuation of this poem presents the insistent affirmation of a totality of the self (“I have”) in the contradictions of the natural and human world, enumerated following this litanical statement:

I have the pulsation of the seas
 I have the compression of the mountains
 I have the tensions of the storm
 The remission of valleys

I have seasons in blood

I have seaweed holding me back
 I have propellers for waking I have drownings
 I have levers

I have impediments
 I have deliverance
 I have struggles
 I have flower and peace. (*Poèmes pour un texte* 76)

This peace is not given to s/he who comes from a land ceaselessly “beneath the explosion of arms” (*Poèmes pour un texte* 187). The blood that is “fiercely,” “blindly shed, (*Poèmes pour un texte* 219), that will never again be in possession of the world and its seasons, is very often deplored in Andrée Chedid’s poems. War emphasizes, beyond any possible justification, a fragility that is constitutive of us. The poet is haunted by our ephemeral nature, of which she becomes fully conscious in designating her own daughter as a “brief guest” in the world (*Poèmes pour un texte* 207). And

so the massacring of children during a war appears to her an inexplicable atrocity we can only greet through lamentation. Her poem "The Child is Dead" is characteristic, for it situates war in an indeterminate country of the southern Mediterranean area. It presents the murderous enemy himself as prey to the wretchedness of fear. The evocation of the inalterable landscape is the turning-point in the poem, for it restores this murderer to his fundamental humanness beyond particular identity, to the human species that, in an evocation henceforth fusing it with the hills and the orange trees, bemoans the death of (wo)man's offspring. The hard-sounding alliterations of the original's beginning then give way to the softness of the liquid consonants and sibilants:

The village is now emptied
of all its combatants

Riveted to his machine-gun
whose fiery strafings
have just finished off the child
the enemy trembles with fright
sheltered behind an old wall

Everything all around is neat and natural
the sky
the sea
laughing summer
the pines

The enemy
has cast far
beyond the hills

his clothes and his weapon
his history and his laws

To lie down weeping
a few feet away from a fountain
beneath the shade of an orange tree
Next to the child's body. (*Poèmes pour un texte* 96)

A poem more emblematic of a growing consciousness of mankind the poet has wished for, than conveying a reality that Andrée Chedid knows full well (as other texts prove) to be piti-

less. But it is a “forward-looking” poem, which affirms the possible birth of a minimal inner freedom still unavailable to (wo)men because of the harshness of our civilisations. At least we can realise, after the murder, the horror of it! And perhaps one day, “passengers of metamorphosis” (*Textes pour un poème* 271), (wo)men will turn to other decidedly serene futures. “In an orgy of hope” (*Poèmes pour un texte* 231), the poet thinks it is up to her to assist in this opening up as much as possible. But she is under no illusion as to either the harshness of the times or that of time in which “the body is slowly deconstructed” (*Poèmes pour un texte* 232). It is by “leaning on death” that she tries to trace out a path that is not one of despair, thanks to “enigma-Poetry,” “[she] who disturbs mirrors / [She] who has no end no name” (*Poèmes pour un texte* 254).

Coming to France at age thirty-three, from her native Lebanon, Vénus Khoury-Ghata has never ceased to feel deeply her attachment to the country of her roots and her mother tongue. She retains from the latter, in her use of French, a teeming imagination that slips easily from one reign to the other and introduces a certain baroque into her poetry. Her charm is never without some disarray. When she approaches the universal, she does so not from the standpoint of her “dual land,” but by remembering her mother, her childhood. The sumptuous image of salt thrown into the flames and brightening them leads to the magical union of fire and all the waters of the world. Children bring back with them fabulous natural gifts from all over the world. But, very quickly, this world becomes acidic, causes hallucinations, then takes to fighting and commits suicide in the midst of disorder, leaving nothing behind but confusion and compassion. “Death, the daily bread of the Lebanese,” the poet writes elsewhere (Preface to *Anthologie personnelle* 7) . . . She never forgets it, in this poem with its respiratory rhythm, in which a strange entropy establishes itself with the help of highly concrete images:

The salt my mother would throw into her stove
 untied the flames’ tongues
 and extended our bodies as far as
 Lake Baikal

the banks of the Euphrates
 and those of Amazonia
 We brought back blue toucans in our hair
 bread trees between our teeth
 Ate sour fruit that made the whole table pull a face
 chewed on red grass that made the walls hallucinate
 In my mother's stove the rumor-bearing winds set to
 Amazonia's rivers committed suicide in the Atlantic
 the bells of Tibet were throttled amongst their ropes

We would listen to all the tales of woe
 we sympathized. (*Anthologie personnelle* 23)

A brief period of happiness in France. Love, expressed via a sharp sense of the inside of the woman loved being explored by “the man of skill”:

He knew the body of his wife in all its nooks and crannies, at night moved about within it without switching on his eyes and without getting his fingers jammed between her ribs or getting lost where her knees came together, where no signpost indicates directions. (*Qui parle au nom du jasmin* 15)

But the magic of the universe, which accompanies the lovers, still has impenetrable aspects to it:

Who can speak in the name of jasmine? When thunder shatters the eardrum of ancient grass and rain, lower than the lowest of luzerns, parcels the earth into infinite ponds? When the sun fin-gering the gates is happy just to look on? (*Qui parle au nom du jasmin* 63)

The loss of her much loved husband inspired in Vénus Khoury-Ghata a number of poems in which his death—death in general—is present though in a form that offers no narcissistic lamenting. The person who has died has not disappeared. He lives a certainly anxious, diminished life; but he remains an underworld ghost who still possesses memory of living things, and it is he who is on stage. Some kind of communication is possible between ourselves and this mysterious wanderer:

Sometimes
 at a turning-point of ashes

an extinguished stone lights up upon the place of his home.

To find once more the same arrangement of windows
renders his step surer.

His mouth filled with darkness
he takes measure of the other side of his garden sticking close to
the walls of the white ant colonies.

He has that way of dragging his soul about like a dog one is
trying to lose. (*Anthologie personnelle* 95)

Each of Vénus Khoury-Ghata's poems is thus a kind of fable, at once simple and astonishing, in which freshness of sensation brings the reader to the edge of the unknown. She has expressed a genuine fondness for the pre-Colombian Olmec people, a race which disappeared thousands of years ago, yet which lives on furtively with its former beliefs and offers a collective vision of death:

You are laid out right against the cordillera
a mirror on your belly to dazzle the south
your feet bound together to arrest your journeying into nothingness

Your breastplate diffuses gold over the peevish brambles and
incrusted nuggets in the rock's pain

You are at the mercy of grave robbers and clouds
that graze upon the scant air of the Andes

Every blow of the pickaxe draws a sharp grunt from your stone-laden soul. (*Anthologie personnelle* 70)

Fables pour un peuple d'argile (*Fables for a Clay People*): this title, which belongs to the collection concerning the Olmecs, could possibly be the one, out of all of Vénus Khoury-Ghata's works, that gives voice, with its calculated impulsiveness, to something rare in French literature. It is the voice of a fragility often close to breakage, but at the same time it pursues an oriental narrative line, takes delight in material things, is tenaciously attached to the world.

Martine Broda, for her part, possesses a strong European culture. The French-language translator of Paul Celan, the author of

a study of his work and others on Pierre Jean Jouve, she has in this way marked out her predilection for writers haunted by questions of lack. Recently, she has published a fine book: *L'Amour du nom: Essai sur le lyrisme et la lyrique amoureuse* (*The Love of Naming: Essay on Lyricism and Love Lyrics*), in which she shows that lyricism is not narcissism, but on the contrary a letting go of the subject and its object, a love "from afar," a love of (at times imaginary) "naming" of the loved woman, as troubadours, Dante, Nerval, Jouve, the Aragon of *Le Fou d'Elsa* (*Elsa's Fool*) celebrated it. One does indeed feel that she is speaking in her own name, for her own poetry, personally taking to task those who, today, deride lyricism and proclaim it to be pure sentimentalism.

The collection *Grand jour* (*Full Daylight*) which was published by Belin in 1994 (and subsequently appeared in diverse publications) traces out an itinerary of "love from afar." It constitutes a "burning at the hollow heart / of a fullness presence":

a never acted scene
 forever is rehearsed
 eternalness looped about

a never acted scene
 forever dispossesses

is the empty burning center. (*Grand jour* 12)

To she who is burned by this center, "awfulness" is revealed, via an insistent reference to Rilke: "Every angel is awful" (*Grand jour* 15). Walter Benjamin tells us that this angel is the one that makes all things abandoned brilliant and all-consuming. He represents the moment of its passing as a wild pain that places in question our entire being since birth. Not an abstract, metaphysical pain, but at the root of our body and our soul: blood, rending, death.

My words hurt as I bite them my love-milk teeth
 drip with blood
 towards the full face of the moon
 I ramble on and on
 the round mirror I should like to have
 turning inwards what it moreover reflects
 I diverge endlessly

the face I should like to be
 towards the chipped blade of the moon
 searching with intense truncated love. (*Grand jour* 34)

This poem has the emotion of a pitiless cry of separation of “havebeing,” the two verbs stuck together being the pivotal center of a most dense language. Elsewhere, the latter thins out, creates intervallic space for itself so as to articulate an antibirth in which the subject is lost:

I found (myself) upon the ground, lying upon sheets
 pressing towards the other crying

a face the angel I had fought with
 blinding my birth. (*Grand jour* 58)

Such a working out of destiny is the price of the final transcendence towards some transfiguration, some “starting over” at a higher stage of being, that may be expressed through words placed down separately, as it were, upon the page, like stutterings and loss of speech:

this starting over

like a drawn line burning
 the skin and imploring
 the enigma to desire
 this beginning over so much

when energyless

tilts

a gaze a withdrawal a. (*Grand jour* 87)

Other poems speak of the fullness of a dispossession of the subject in a fusion of the elements:

like a heavy stone
 she who is I no more falls away
 towards what is coming
 to her too heavy

quivers like the thudding wave
that catches her

oh night of water
in the hand of fire. (*Grand jour* 90)

A different, demanding yet also vibrant poetry of the things of the body and the things of the world in order to reach out to

the angel of the bloodied bridge
in the mud her mouth of ecstasy. (*Grand jour* 82)

Notes

1. In addition to being poets, all three authors produce other forms of writing. Andrée Chedid is a novelist and playwright. Vénus Khoury-Ghata is also a novelist. Martine Broda translates and writes essays.
2. Translations of quoted material were provided by the article's translator.

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