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Standing and The Ninth Floor Again: The Military Hospital by Sghaier Ouled Ahmed

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Hager Ben Driss
Standing

Sghaier Ouled Ahmed
مقام الوقوف

Standing up
in
my shoes,
my shadow kissing the cheek of a distant girl.
Standing up,
nothing to say
except
that my lonely soul
is now alone.

Standing up
under
my head.
If our master wills,
I shall take it off the way I do with my shoes;
turn it around in the air,
and throw it in one of the many garbage cans.
And then ...
there must be a "then"
so that the conversation goes on and on.

Standing up
under
my shadow,
while my shadow politely answers
the greetings of unique seeds.

Standing up
for years
cooking my food on the idea of fire.
The Fire,
O Master,
is there: you have it
in the scabbards of the ready legions.

Standing up,
asking ants
and bees;
and yes
asking time,
about a tortoise
who went before us to new eras.

Standing up
in a vast expanse that Uqba or Hannibal will reach,
but won't distinguish the sea from Kairouan.
They would only find streets and avenues
named for them
by some guy
in a newspaper.

Standing with skies
beneath me
and above
skies
milked into a tough clay bowl of faith.

Standing up.
He who locked me out
forgot that I
am still standing
to bring the place to Him
and transmit to the sheikh
the voice of his disciples.

Standing up
and words,
like a coffin,
proceed
to
their
grave
in
the
poem.

(Tunis, winter 1989)

Hager Ben Driss
*The Ninth Floor Again:
The Military Hospital*

Sghaier Ouled Ahmed

الطابق التاسع مجدداً
المستشفى العسكري

I love a dead trinity:
my father,
death, and the great poetry.

I venerate a living trinity:
life, its daughter,
and the present tense of verbs when used correctly.

I look upon truth:
The mouth of a volcano
.....
which neither sand
nor water can fully satiate.

I board the ark with two versions of my land ...
and a tent ...
where I take a nap,
flying in the nebula like a butterfly.

I insist on commas and dots,
for I have no letters other than commas and dots.
Our sky is full of diacritical marks, too.
It's had no language for a long time.

I prepare food for the mourners around me:
truth tellers,
liars,
lovers,
and haters.

I don't forget the qāri', either,
who condenses the texts and al-Mughira's testimony as in:

Alif

Lam

Mim

I insist that you are
a replica of me,
and I of you:
only separated by our understanding of paradise.

I believe They are greedy for the afterlife,
therefore,
they make a hell of life.

Commentary:

Dubbed the “poet of the country” (شاعر البلاد), Sghaier Ouled Ahmed (1955–2016) celebrated his love of Tunisia throughout his poetic oeuvre. His work was censored under the regimes of both Habib Bourguiba (1956–1987) and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011) and he was banned from media. In 1984, his poem “Song of the Six Days” (نشيد الأيام الستة), in which he chronicles the violent events of the Bread Uprising, was censored and the poet was incarcerated. His poetry became available after the 2011 revolution and he emerged as the most prominent poet of dissent. He bestowed upon himself the title of the “poetic leader of the Revolution” and pursued his poetic activism against all types of regimentation and control. He was a vehement opponent of religious fundamentalism and launched a fierce attack on religious strictures and all the custodians of Islam.

“Standing” (1989) and “The Ninth Floor Again: The Military Hospital” (2015) appeared in his volume of poetry *Muswaddat Watan (Draft of a Homeland, 2015)*¹, a collection of poetry that gathers old and new poems. Despite the lapse of several years, the two poems offer stylistic and thematic reverberations. Both raise issues of death and religion.

“Standing” offers a significant testimony. His claim in the first stanza that he has “nothing to say” unfolds in a flow of words that destabilizes the seeming immobility of his posture. Standing is an act of resistance as he witnesses and reports the maladies of his country. While the first stanza describes his loneliness in carrying the responsibility of testimony, the last one presents death as the ultimate destiny of his poetry. Death as related to his poetic production is a compulsive image in Ouled Ahmed’s early work. Because of censorship, his poetry was doomed to die as soon as it was produced.

“The Ninth Floor Again: The Military Hospital” was written a few months before he passed away. Death is interpolated in this poem in a different way: it is more a celebration than a

¹ *Muswaddat Watan*. Tunis: Al-dar al-Arabiyyah Lilkitab, 2015 (“Maqam al-Wuquf” [Standing], pp. 255–59; “Al-Tabiq al-tasi’ Mujaddadan” [The Ninth Floor Again], pp. 305–07).

mourning of his poetry. His relentless critique of the abuse of religion by those who appointed themselves “the ministers of God” brought upon him the wrath of religious zealots and he was pronounced an infidel. Even though expressing a sarcastic attitude towards fanatics, the end of the poem expresses Ouled Ahmed’s belief that fundamentalism is not inherent to religion, but rather to specific factions.

A seeming simplicity defines Ouled Ahmed’s poetry. The fluidity of his language and especially his rhyming lines are quite difficult to render in translation. In “The Ninth Floor Again,” I managed to create a rhyme scheme only in the first two stanzas. This musicality is essential in recreating the celebratory atmosphere of the whole poem, which is remarkable given that it was written on the poet’s deathbed.

What makes the two poems challenging in terms of translation is the density of cultural and historical allusions. In “The Ninth Floor Again,” for instance, the poet inserts towards the end of the poem “al-Mughira” without the least explanation, which obfuscates the meaning of the whole stanza. That is why I added the word “testimony” based on my knowledge of al-Mughira’s story. In fact, the poet refers to Walid Ben al-Mughira, renowned for his strong command of the Arabic language and his stubborn refusal to convert to Islam. Upon hearing the Koran recited by the Prophet, al-Mughira was impressed by its eloquence and the beauty of its economic style, which Ouled Ahmed exemplifies in his quote of the opening words of surat al-Baqara: the three letters *Alif, Lam, Mim*. I used foreignization as a strategy of translation both at the beginning and the end of this stanza. I kept the word *qāri* (قارئ القرآن), for the palimpsestic nature of translation is sometimes challenged by some words that resist erasure.

Unless the reader is well versed in Islamic culture, several religious references and allusions are lost in translation. “Standing” offers pertinent examples of Ouled Ahmed’s subtle critique, often verging on irony, of religious dogmatism. His lines “If our master wills/I shall take it off the way I do with my shoes” refers to the practice of taking off shoes before entering a mosque. Religious zealots, however, seem to take off their “heads” as well. In other words, they obliterate all critical thinking. The poet’s subtle irony and deliberate obfuscation of

meaning are manifest at the threshold of his text: the title. The word *maqam*, in “Maqam al-Wuquf” (مقام الوقوف), offers several meanings: a shrine, a sanctuary, a high position. Stopping at the threshold of the poem to ponder upon meaning comes as an ironic nod to those who put off their shoes, as well as their heads, at the threshold of a mosque. I finally opted to translate the title into “standing” because this word encapsulates the meaning of upright position as well as high status. In the same poem, stanza 7 presents a particularly challenging venture. The original line at the end of the stanza is “tuhlabu fi taasatin min fakhar al-→aqidah” (تحلب في طاسة من فخار العقيدة). The originality of this line resides in the poet’s idiomatic use of the word *fakhar* (clay), reminiscent here of the Tunisian idiom *fakhar bikri* (ancient clay), which means something solid. A literal translation (“a bowl made out of the clay of faith”) would be rather meaningless. My use of “a tough clay bowl of faith” describes better the ossified religious ideas and beliefs.

Tunisian literature is rarely translated into English. This translation emanates from an urge to disseminate Tunisian literary production via Ouled Ahmed’s work. It speaks to the spirit of the poet who strived for long years to see his country free and democratic. The beauty, eloquence, and the dissident impulse in his poetry deserve more attention.