

This article was downloaded by: [The University of Texas at Dallas]

On: 25 May 2015, At: 12:55

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Translation Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/utrv20>

Selected Poems by Adonis

Sinan Antoon

Published online: 02 Apr 2013.

To cite this article: Sinan Antoon (2013) Selected Poems by Adonis, Translation Review, 85:1, 77-81, DOI: [10.1080/07374836.2013.768164](https://doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2013.768164)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07374836.2013.768164>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

have appeared in *Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture*, *METAMORPHOSES*, *Kritya*, and other journals.

NOTES

1. Green Hill, "Power and Translation: Lisa Katz at AWP," *Green Hill* (blog), February 15, 2008, <http://strayshot.blogspot.com/2008/02/power-translation-lisa-katz-at-awp.html>. This blog post includes a full transcription of Katz's untitled talk.
2. Lisa Katz, "Beyond Amichai," *Tablet*, January 10, 2012, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/87809/beyond-amichai>.
3. Betsy Ribble, "Journey of the Sentence: A Conversation with Susan Bernofsky," *The Daily Pen American* (blog), February 2, 2012, <http://www.pen.org/blog/?p=8364>.
4. Admiel Kosman and Lisa Katz, interview by Jake Marmer, *Forward* (audio podcast), December 6, 2011, <http://forward.com/articles/147440/yidlit-admiel-kosman/>.
5. Goldberg, "Certain Aspects of Imitation and Translation in Poetry," 840.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

GOLDBERG, LEAH. "Certain Aspects of Imitation and Translation in Poetry." In *Actes du IVe congrès de l'Association internationale de littérature comparée, Fribourg 1964* [Proceedings of the IVth congress of the International Comparative Literature Association], vol. 2, edited by François Jost, 837–43. The Hague: Mouton, 1966.

KOSMAN, ADMIEL. *Approaching You in English*. Translated by Lisa Katz with Shlomit Naim-Naor. Brookline, MA: Zephyr.

Adonis. *Selected Poems*. Translated by **Khaled Mattawa**. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. 432 pp.

Reviewed by Sinan Antoon

Adonis (Ali Ahmad Sa`id) (b. 1930) is one of the most influential and dominant Arab poets of the modern era and a perennial Nobel contender since the late 1980s. A number of his individual works have been ably and beautifully translated into English in previous decades by Samuel Hazo and Shawkat Toorawa. More recently, Adnan Haydar and Michael Beard translated Adonis's most powerful and enduring work, *Aghani Mihyar al-Dimashqi* (1961), as *Mihyar of Damascus: His Songs*. However, a book of selections spanning Adonis's entire oeuvre since the late 1950s is still lacking in English. The volume under review was an ambitious attempt to remedy this conspicuous gap in the Anglophone world.

The pieces in *Selected Poems* were chosen from fourteen individual works published between 1957 and 2008, and fill almost four hundred pages. Adonis's early and mid-career works have stood the test of time, but even his most ardent fans would agree that his later works, those written in the past two decades, lack his legendary verve. The exception is the multivolume *al-Kitab* (*The Book*), a poetic journey through Arab history and culture narrated by its greatest poet, the tenth-century al-Mutanabbi. Adonis began working on it in the mid-1970s and published the first of its four volumes in 1995. Mattawa decided not to include any excerpts from *al-Kitab*

because, as he states in the introduction to *Selected Poems*: “no small sample . . . would offer an adequate sense of the work’s scope” (xxiv). This is not very convincing. There is no doubt that *al-Kitab* is complex and challenging, but a representative excerpt or excerpts would have enriched this book. The first volume of *al-Kitab* has been translated and published in French and the second is forthcoming from Seuil. Selections from three of Adonis’s later works (*Prophesy, O Blind One* [2003], *Beginnings of the Body, Ends of the Sea* [2003], and *Printer of the Planets’ Books* [2008]), all written in the past decade or so, take up a hundred pages, almost one-fourth of the whole book. Some of this space could have been better served by featuring further selections from earlier and more enduring works. One would expect a bibliography of the original Arabic works and editions the translator used, but there is none.

The translator’s short introduction includes a few glitches. Adonis never advocated the use of dialect in poetry (xvi). On the contrary, his disagreements over this issue caused a major rift with Yusuf al-Khal (1917–87), and Adonis eventually left *Shi`r*, the pioneering journal the two had co-founded in Beirut. The names of major classical Arab poets who influenced Adonis are mistransliterated; “Abu Nawwas” (ix, 396) should be “Abu Nuwas,” “al-Mutannabi” (ix, xix, xx, xi) should be “al-Mutanabbi,” and “al-Ma`ari” (xix, xxi, 274, 395) should be “al-Ma`arri.” So are classical terms such as “al-Mu` tazala” (xii) (group of rational thinkers), which should be “al-Mu` tazila.” Even the title of Adonis’s most famous collection is wrong; “Ughniyat” (xvi) should be “Aghani Mihyar al-Dimashqi” (“The Songs of Mihyar of Damascus”). On their own these are minor errors, but, alas, they are symptomatic of serious misreadings of the short vowels in scores of words in the original Arabic in many of the poems throughout this volume. Moreover, four hundred pages of poetry, much of which has references to, and is in conversation with, figures from Arab-Islamic history and Islamic mysticism, produces only four pages of notes. This is far too meager and could have been expanded to illuminate the context and intertexts of many a poem for the benefit of the reader.

One example out of many is when Adonis includes a line from al-Ma`arri (973–1058): “Jasadi khirqatun tukhatu ila ‘l-ardi / faya kha’ita ‘l-awalimi khitni”¹ (My body is a rag being sewn to the earth / O you who sew the worlds, sew me). This is rendered “The body is a rag dragged on earth / Walls of the world, support me” (278), a rendering semantically way off the mark. “Kha’it” (one who sews) becomes “ha’it” (wall) and “khitni” (sew me) becomes “support me.” A note on al-Ma`arri’s poem and the particular notion of man’s return to dust would have helped the reader. When Adonis embeds lines from the eighth-century `Abdulrahman al-Dakhil in his poem, the reader is not told and is left to think they are Adonis’s (68). The same occurs in “Body” from “Singular in Plural Form.” Adonis references two lines from al-Tawhidi (930–1023): “Zahiri muntathirun la amluku minhu shay`an / wa batini musta`irun la ajidu lahu fay`an,”² but there is no note pointing this out and the meaning is completely lost on the translator. Instead of something like “My exterior is scattered and I possess none of it / My interior burns and I can find no shade for it,” we get the following: “my surfaces spread and I own none of them / my insides reduced no place in them for me to live” (125). Adonis’s poetry often employs Qur’anic references and metaphors. These escape the translator, too, and are mistranslated. For example, in “Concerto for 11th September,” “sundus Allah”³ is translated “cedars of God” (303), but “sundus” means “silk” or “brocade” and appears three times in the Qur’an. The Qur’anic Lote tree (Qur’an 53:14) “sidrat al-Muntaha”⁴ also becomes “cedar.”

In his note on his approach to translation, Mattawa writes that his translations “are neither literal nor so flexible as to stray from the literal context of the poem” (xxvi). One could live with such flexibility, but not the depressing number of mistakes in this volume.

The short vowels indicating pronouns are often misread. For example, "zami'tu"⁵ (I have become thirsty) becomes "You have become thirsty" (6) because the translator reads it "zami'ti." In "Home," "ba`du"⁶ (still) is misread as "bu`dun" (horizon). Thus, "hikayatu 'l-ashbahi fi baytina / ba`du `ala shifahina takhturu" (The story of ghosts in our house / still crosses our lips) becomes "The story of ghosts in our house / a horizon that crosses our lips" (8).

Idiomatic expressions are often translated literally, and the result is confusing and jarring in English. For example, in "Banished," "sufrā 's-sawa`idi wal-qulub"⁷ (Arms and hearts empty) is rendered as "a cipher to arms and hearts" (9) because the translator misreads "sufr" in the expression "sufr al-yadayn" (empty-handed) as "sifr" (cipher) and we get the following: "Banished and lost among the roads / a cipher to arms and hearts / hunger is all our cries" (9). In "A Mirror for a Tyrant," "kay tarji`a 'l-ardu ila `ahdiha"⁸ (So the earth may return the way it was) becomes "so the earth will fulfill her covenant" (88) because "ahd" (covenant) is translated literally. The common expression "'ala shafa," which means "on the verge of," is also rendered literally throughout as "on the lips of." So "'ala shafa al-ufq" becomes "on the lip of the horizon" (153). Ironically, in this case the misreading makes the translation even more poetic. But that is an exception, of course. In "Singular in Plural Form," Adonis uses the expression "qab qawsayn,"⁹ which means "to be very close to." Here, "lakinnani asilu la aqifu / wa-jasadi rama idh rama / biqabi qawsayni" (But I flow and never stop / My body shot itself and became very close) becomes the incomprehensible: "My body tumbles with it, and falls / between two parentheses about to reunify" (171). This is because the translator takes "qawsayn" to mean "two parentheses," but even the literal expression means "the length of two arrows."

Enjambment and word order are often misread, disfiguring meaning or needlessly altering image. In "Rains," "Yumsiku bilmihrahi fi sadrihi / ghaymun wa fi kaffayhi amtaru"¹⁰ (He holds the plow, there are clouds in his chest, and rain in his palms) is rendered "He holds the plow to his chest / cloud and rains in his palms" (11). At times the translation produces the opposite meaning of the original. In describing the revolutionary figure of Mihyar in "Psalm," Adonis writes: "la aslafa lahu wa-fi khutuwaṭihi judhuruḥu"¹¹ (He has no ancestors and his roots are in his steps). This becomes "He has no offspring, no roots to his steps" (23).¹² Elsewhere, "jibilla"¹³ (nature or disposition) is confused with "jabal" and translated as "mountain" (30). In "The Flood," where a sinking Noah addresses the dove and expresses his disinterest in salvation, "al-qarar al-sahiq"¹⁴ (deep bottom) is rendered "abysmal decision" (55). The word "qarar" is also mistranslated in another poem where Adonis has "mawti sullamun lijasadi wa jasadi bila qarar"¹⁵ (My death is a ladder for my body, and my body is a bottomless sea) and the translator gives us: "my body is indecisive" (142). In "Tree of Melancholy," "sada" (rust) is misread as "sada" (echo) (65).

When Adonis uses Sufi terminology, the translation often falters as well. In "Tree," "takaya"¹⁶ (monasteries or asylums) becomes the anachronistic "lounges" (73). In a "Woman and a Man," "sarirah" (heart, soul, mind, or secret) in "wa-nazilti / tahta sarirati wa-kashaftini"¹⁷ (And you descended beneath my soul and revealed me) becomes "slid under my bed and revealed me" (81). When Adonis writes "aqra`u kitaba kunhiki"¹⁸ (I read the book of your substance), this becomes "I read the book of your priests" (140) because "kunhiki" (your nature or substance) is confused with "kuhhaniki" (your priests). Flora and fauna do not fare well in the translation, either. For example, "shaharir"¹⁹ (blackbirds) becomes "sparrows" (319). "Qindil al-bahr"²⁰ (jellyfish) is translated literally as "the sea's lantern" (147). In "Singular in a Plural Form" "wal-hubbu kam`atun wa-ta`asheeb" (love is truffles and grass) becomes "love is like water and grass" (150) because "kam`ah" is misread as "kama" (like water).

Beyond Sufi terminology and idiomatic expressions, what is baffling is that the great majority of the glaring and elementary mistakes (and I found more than two hundred) occur when the context of the original is quite clear. In "A Time between Ashes and Roses,"²¹ the beautiful image "sa'iqin al-ghuyum / kaqati'in min al-ahsina" (riding clouds like a herd of horses) becomes "driving clouds / like a herd of fortresses" (110) because "ahsina" (horses) is confused with "husun" (fortresses). Adonis often repeats the notion of the poet bearing witness and chronicling history. When he writes "arrakhtu hadha al-zaman / bismi hadha al-makan"²² (I chronicled this age / In the name of this place), the translator has "Let go of time / in the name of place" (201). There are a few pages where the translation is readable and accurate, but, alas, these are the exception. Even when there are no misreadings, there are too many awkward sentences, such as "There is no blockade against the horizon except in your mind" (378) or "Love is a mouth mispronounced from its home" (155).

That this translation was awarded both the PEN 2011 Award for Poetry in Translation and the Banipal Prize for translation raises serious questions about the criteria used by the judges. In the meantime, Adonis, and his readers, deserve better.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sinan Antoon, poet, novelist, and translator, is associate professor of Arabic literature at New York University. His translation of Mahmoud Darwish's *In the Presence of Absence* won the 2012 National Translation Award. His third novel, *The Corpse Washer*, is forthcoming from Yale University Press.

NOTES

1. Adonis, *Ihtifa'an bilashya' al-Wadiha al-Ghamida*, 96.
2. Adonis, *Al-A`mal al-Shir`iyya*, 3:284.
3. Adonis, *Tanabba' Ayyuha al-A`ma*, 121.
4. *Ibid.*, 133.
5. Adonis, *Al-A`mal Al-Shir`iyya*, 1:49.
6. *Ibid.*, 1:56.
7. *Ibid.*, 1:58.
8. *Ibid.*, 1:375.
9. *Ibid.*, 3:350.
10. *Ibid.*, 1:66.
11. *Ibid.*, 1:143.
12. Haydar and Beard have "He has no ancestors. His roots are in his footsteps." Adonis, *Mihyar of Damascus*, 23.
13. Adonis, *Al-A`mal al-Shir`iyya*, 1:161.
14. *Ibid.*, 1:285.
15. *Ibid.*, 3:308.
16. *Ibid.*, 1:124.
17. *Ibid.*, 1:341.
18. *Ibid.*, 3:306.
19. Adonis, *Tanabba' Ayyuha al-A`ma*, 145.
20. Adonis, *Al-A`mal Al-Kamila*, 3:315
21. *Ibid.*, 1:227.
22. *Ibid.*, 1:550.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ADONIS. *Al-A`mal al-Shir`iyya* [Complete Poems]. 3 vols. Damascus: Dar al-Mada, 1996.
- . *Al-Kitab*. 3 vols. Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2005.
- . *Ihtifa'an bilashya' al-Wadiha al-Ghamida*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1988.
- . *Mihyar of Damascus: His Songs*. Translated with an introduction by Adnan Haydar and Michael Beard. Rochester: BOA Editions, 2008.
- . *Selected Poems*. Translated by Khaled Mattawa. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.
- . *Tanabba' Ayyuha al-A`ma*. Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2005.
- . *A Time between Ashes and Roses*. Translation, critical Arabic edition, and afterword by Shawkat M. Toorawa. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004.
- . *Transformation of the Lover*. Translated by Samuel Hazo. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982.

Magdalena Tulli. *In Red*. Translated by **Bill Johnston**. Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2011. 158 pp.

Reviewed by Madeline G. Levine

Magdalena Tulli was introduced to Anglophone readers in 2004 through Bill Johnston's translation of her first magical, plotless, prose poem of a novel, *Dreams and Stones* (*Sny i kamienie*, 1995). One year later, in 2005, Johnston gave us *Moving Parts* (*Tryby*, 2003), and in 2007, *Flaw* (*Skaza*, 2006). One important book from Tulli's oeuvre remained untranslated, however, as Johnston apparently sought to keep pace with Tulli's output while also maintaining his extraordinary productivity as our most prolific—and exceptionally gifted—translator from Polish into English. Johnston's *Wikipedia* entry lists at least one book-length translation every year since 2002, including, surprisingly for this translator known for his prose translations, the award-winning volume *New Poems* by Tadeusz Różewicz (2007), and, in 2011, his breathtaking, exhilarating translation of *Stone upon Stone* (*Kamień na kamieniu*, 1984) by Wiesław Myśliwski, for which Johnston was awarded the 2012 PEN Translation Award. Now we have the missing volume, *In Red*, Johnston's 2011 translation of Tulli's highly acclaimed novel from 1998, *W czerwieni*. Fans of Tulli are probably hoping that Johnston will stay with this writer, whose English voice is the one he has created. Tulli's latest book, *Włoskie szpilki* (*Italian Stilettos*), awaits translation.

"Stories are indestructible" (157), the anonymous, affectless narrator of *In Red* declares toward the end of the novel, perhaps deliberately echoing Bulgakov's well-known dictum in *Master and Margarita* that manuscripts don't burn. Furthermore, "[s]tories are not subject to anyone's will, for they have their own; it is unbreakable, like a steel spring concealed in the depths of a mechanical instrument, which sooner or later will unwind fully, and the cylinder will play its melody to the end" (158). The story told here is the history of the imaginary town of Stitchings. The town's name in Polish, "Ściegi," meaning, literally, "stitches," is implausible as a place name and thus begs to be translated. While "Ściegi" has no particular cultural resonance, it is unfortunate that for the Anglophone reader "Stitchings" conjures up images of an English country town. Stitchings/Ściegi, chimerical though it is, experiences historical events that place it squarely in northern Poland, albeit in an imaginary fourth, Swedish, partition. This is clear in the Polish edition; the translation omits a specific reference to the historical partitioning powers