NICOLE BALL


Bilingual edition; (French title: La Remontée des Cendres, Éditions du Seuil, 1991)

In 1991, when the two long poems that compose La remontée des Cendres came out in a bilingual French and Arabic edition, Tahar Ben Jelloun had already published an impressive body of work encompassing many different literary genres (poetry, theater, novel, essays) and had been awarded the Prix Goncourt, the most prestigious literary prize in France, for his novel La Nuit Sacrée (1987). Born in Morocco in 1944, he emigrated to France in 1971 and chose to write in French. He is a widely celebrated post-colonial writer and a tireless spokesperson for the voiceless immigrant workers of France and the French youth “issus de l’immigration” of the housing projects around France’s major cities.

The Rising of the Ashes is apparently the first book of his poetry to come out in English. Large excerpts of an earlier version of Cullen Goldblatt’s translation have appeared in May 2006 in Words Without Borders: The Online Magazine for International Literature.

Cullen Goldblatt, a South African native, is a poet and a translator of Francophone African poetry. He lives in New York. His translations of African francophone poetry have appeared in Guernica, an online magazine, and Chimurenga, a South African journal. His translation of the book-length poem, elobi, by Cameroonian author Patrice Nganang, was published by Africa World Press in 2006.
METAMORPHOSES

The first of the two poems gives the book its title. It ends with the date February-April 1991, shortly after the end of the Gulf war. It is a tribute to the dead of that largely forgotten conflict, a lament over the destruction it brought upon that part of the world, and, through the power of words, an attempt to have them rise from their ashes and bring them back to life. Here is what Tahar Ben Jelloun writes in his preface:

Officially, the Gulf war is over. Kuwait is no longer occupied, Iraq is in large part destroyed. And the dead are buried. But not all the dead. The Westerners counted their dead and repatriated them. Exiting, they left behind thousand of victims. We will perhaps never know how many people, troops and civilians, were killed by the tons of bombs dropped on Iraq. It is to these anonymous bodies, bodies burnt to ashes seen briefly in television images, that this text intends to give homage. It would give them names and inscribe them on a gravestone for remembrance. Without hatred. With dignity. In their mass grave, the bodies will form a kind of anonymous face, containing and evoking all the dead.

The mission of the poet is to keep memory alive even if words pale when the wound is deep, when the well-panned chaos is brutal and irreversible. Against that, words. (...) The poet shouts or murmurs; knows silence could be akin to an offense, a crime.

All the dead who become “this body that was a body”, “this body that was a soul, a name and a face”, are not just abstract casualties of war; their ashes must rise from a very specific soil and time to be carried away by the rising wind and “go settle on the eyes of the living.” The images are often drawn (or born) from an “afflicted desert”, a “land of sand”, “avid for water” that “was given only blood to irrigate the great silence”, “a silence that keeps a few grains of sand”. The ashes are those of a body in a “black plastic bag” with “a gaze slowly uprooted from the face”, with eyes that are “holes where flies live”, of a body which is a “wrecked house. / There is neither door nor window / just a lacerated mattress, a cooking pot, a stale loaf of bread, a coat on a hook, gutted wall, grey dust and the previous year’s calendar.”

But they also carry the memory of a body filled with a simple, happy life “with a garden, a fountain and some books”, that was
once “a word”, “a dream” and “a laugh”.

Then, about one third into the poem “a voice” replaces the poet’s voice and the “the body” becomes “us”, the dead:

Though we may wish to stay anonymous, it is our destiny at stake.
The land draws us in; swallows us then gives us to the brackish river water.
We float on our backs, stomachs swollen
eyes staring at the sun
we no longer have eyes, only sockets imprisoning images.
Our skin is no longer our skin.
They have pulled it off us like a stolen cloak
a borrowed shroud.

Then “another voice” takes over, then a third one, then a fourth, and they each become “I”, individual dead engaged with each other in a mournful conversation from the different pits they were thrown into:

(...) I no longer have a stomach
I no longer have a body
I am a bag
a burlap sack full of earth
I am a field above a cliff
I am a field of stones where snakes sleep
My dismembered limbs are cold
Is this hell
to be cold in a phantom body?
Who speaks from the bottom of this grave?

But these phantom voices aren’t just mournful. They are bitter and angry because “the portrait of the dictator is intact”, because “the portrait of the gravedigger remains untouched.”

Who will return a name to my wife and a face to our past?
Who will recall the masked mornings
when a metal arm snatched the children?
“It is for the front”
“For the Nation” they said.
It is an image that falls
trodden by the adolescents’ bare feet.
“This is for Victory”, open stomach,
from which wounded sparrows flee.
The Mother of Victories is an immense cemetery
without gravestones and prayers
without trees and without cats
a great expanse where the blood of words and of
people
mingle in the sand.

Another voice:

And me
I refuse the prayer for the dead
the posthumous glory and the rose made of soil
I am neither soldier nor martyr
I am a shoemaker and I have forgotten my name
I am an artisan and I like love songs
I love honey and olive oil
I like arak and orange blossoms.
(…)

Tahar Ben Jelloun’s anger is not just aimed at the “gravedigger”. “They”, as the poet calls them, or “The world of the powerful” do not forget their dead.

“They” counted their dead.
Delicate hands
white-gloved hands pulled them from the sand
strong arms set them in coffins.
Official mourning lifted them covered with flags and myth.
The day accompanied them as far as the cemetery.

They named their dead
whole bodies and ennobled souls
gift to green prairies
for memory under glass
and gentle shadows
and heaven’s grace.

(Who has not seen at the end of the evening news the name and face of the fallen American troops of the day and heard how many had died at that point? Who knows how many Iraqi civilians or troops have died then and now and will we ever know?)
But back to the poet’s foreword:

The United States of America has developed the habit of washing its hands and soothing its conscience after having caused death and destruction. After declaring the logic of war, this world takes up, with complete equanimity, the logic of the gravedigger.

Once one has covered thousands of anonymous corpses with a blanket of ashes and sand, one cultivates forgetting.

Which is exactly what one of the ghost’s poetic voices in its burlap or black plastic bag says from the bottom of its pit:

Who will count our dead?  
Heap of ashes forgotten by the roadside  
Limbs scattered among abandoned carcasses.

Again, it is the “word”, the poem’s mission never to forget. The poet must name, denounce, and ultimately, revive:

This is a voice forgetful of nothing  
brushing against innocent hands  
rummaging inside peaceable sleep  
giving way beneath the liquid fire of words  
and becoming a face  
a word  
a life.

Ben Jelloun concludes on a positive, hopeful note, on the notion that war, death and destruction can never be the end of man, for “he does not cease to be reborn.” The dead of that very specific war and of all wars rise from their ashes to become “man” again, “all men.”

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The second part of the book consists in a series of poems of unequal length collected under the title Unidentified (Non identifiés). It is about different conflicts that took place on different soils a few years before the Gulf War: the war in Lebanon and the killings of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. Although the form is different, the intention is the same: to re-
member the dead by giving an identity to those “unidentified decomposing men” with their “face and name obliterated”

The dead of the *Rising of the Ashes* were actually more symbolic. Here the specific dates (some days in 1983, later in 1988), the naming—of specific places (cities like Saïda in Southern Lebanon or Palestinian refugee camps where massacres took place), and of people, are particularly poignant. We learn from Ben Jelloun’s footnote at the very end that

> From 1981 to 2008, the *Revue d'études palestiniennes* published a chronology of resistance and repression in the occupied territories. It is in this catalogue of everyday hardship that some of these faces were named.

Even if the Arabic names of the titles were invented, they have the power of creating an immediate poetic effect as well as a sense of reality. Each poem ends with the death of the bearer of the name. Here is a short, simple one in both languages:

**Iyâd Râdi Janajara**

20 décembre 1988
A Naplouse
après les blessures
la mort s’est glissée dans la douceur des mots
et le ciel a dépêché une prière
calme et sereine.
Elle s’est posée, précise, sur un corps fondu dans
l’argile.
Il avait vingt et ans
et venait de Tallûza

December 20, 1988
In Naplouse
after the wounds
death slipped between the softness of the words
and the sky sent a calm
serene prayer.
Death set itself down precisely upon a body cast in
clay.
He was twenty-one years old
and came from Tallûza.
We will know nothing of the killers or the reasons for the killings. The anger is not obvious anymore but the grief is. The few images evoking simple elements of the land once stolen on that part of the earth, a piece of garment abandoned in the landscape somewhere, and the silence perceptible in the rhythms of the poems are all the more wrenching. Like in the first stanza of the last long poem:

Les jours éteints sont faits de silence:  
l’ombre muette d’un regard détendant la pierre se pose;  
elle s’étale et retient la main lourde de l’hiver.  
Sur cette table: une saison, une forêt et le village qui descend vers la rivière.

The extinguished days are made of silence:  
the mute shadow of a gaze that unearths stone  
comes to rest;  
the shadow spreads and holds back winter’s heavy hand.  
On this table: a season, a forest and the village which descends toward the stream.

Or later in the sixth one:

Ni le citronnier, ni l’absinthe, ni la nuit mais l’absence:  
une robe mouillée posée sur un banc de pierres blanches;

Neither lemon tree, nor absinthe, nor night, but absence:  
a wet dress, set on a white stone bench;

To remember the dead by giving the reader a small sense of what their lives had been like and to grieve for their absence is what the poet has assigned himself to do. The poem ends peacefully with a glimmer of hope:

7.  
A statue made of words has put blue on a square of sky dressed in white.  
Men do not talk anymore.  
They watch the sun grow distant.
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Day, like a child, sits on their shoulders.
Silence then laughter.
Their country does not have wrinkles
it has an immense forehead where children run
barefoot.
The moon unfurls its transparent dreams.
Today no bullet has reached these dancing bodies.

8.
(...)
Obstinée,
là lueur descend l'escalier du temps.
Et à chaque corps, elle donne le pain et le nom.

(...)
Stubborn,
the faint light descends time's staircase.
And to each body, it gives bread and a name.

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Faithfulness and humility are the main quality of Cullen Goldblatt’s translation. I could point out a few negligible mistakes here and there but they never affect the general meaning of the lines. One might occasionally regret this faithfulness that keeps the translator too close to the French and sometimes prevents him from producing a harmonious English poem. But in a way this is unfair. What matters is the general impression: if I hadn’t read the poems bilingually, as this edition invites you to do, I am sure I would have been just as moved by, for instance, the calm elegy of grief that permeates the second poem (my favorite) in both languages.

This is a necessary book, whose relevance for us, unfortunately, has nothing to do with poetry. Twenty years later, violence is still raging in the Middle East and contrary to what the poet says, hope, for the moment, seems to stay safely enclosed in the pages of The Rising of the Ashes.

But what the French call “poésie engagée” is still poetry. We have to be grateful to Tahar Ben Jelloun, Cullen Goldblatt and City Lights for having proven that the media do not always have the exclusive privilege of addressing problems that matter to us.