

The Rising of the Ashes

Tahar Ben Jelloun

Translated by Cullen Goldblatt



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Translator's Foreword

When I first encountered this book, I was drawn immediately to its central imaginative and political projects: to make words where there had been the speechlessness of violence and to return personhood to war's victims — to identify the unidentified.

Written in French by the Paris-residing Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun, *La remontée des cendres* (*The Rising of the Ashes*) appeared as a bilingual volume in 1991, the Iraqi poet Kadhim Jihad rendering the accompanying Arabic translation. The first of the book's two long poems bears the book's title, *La remontée des cendres*, and responds to the human devastation caused by the Gulf War. It is dated February-April 1991. The second poem, *Non identifiés* (*Unidentified*), testifies to the displacement and killing of Palestinians in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories during the 1980s.

The first thing I loved about this book was its relationship with history's dates: how it summons them in all their irrefutable numerical precision and then puts them to the text's own quiet work of record-making. *February 1, 1983; April 14, 1983; November 24, 1988; Samia Hussein; Yusra Akef; Ibn Hassan Mokaddam* — the poet is unrelenting in his excavation and tribute, this litany of names and dates, daily atrocities and pleasures.

And although the poems take events of the past as their subject, their words resonate intimately with the present. In late 2003, nine months after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, when I first read the book in the original, it seemed to me the best possible moment to translate it for an Anglophone readership. In 2009, publication seems no less timely.

I often despair the “deployment” of words in our present — the official apologies, the language of reporting, the sanitizing and romanticizing of war, the relentless omissions. I sometimes remind myself of Ben Jelloun's preface to this book: he insists not only on the necessity of words, but on the power of poetry's words in particular — even if they are said “in silence,” even if they “bash” themselves until they, the words, are “senseless.”

The Rising of The Ashes makes a place for grief, as well as for rage and questions and careful description. The poems follow their own imperative — to speak where there is silence, injustice, death — yet they allow for another silence, one that makes mourning possible. I suspect that silence might be as necessary to us as Ben Jelloun's words.

Préface

Officiellement la guerre du Golfe est terminée. Le Koweït n'est plus occupé. L'Irak est en grande partie détruit. Et les morts sont enterrés. Pas tous. Les Occidentaux ont compté leurs morts et les ont rapatriés. En partant, ils ont laissé derrière eux des milliers de victimes. On ne saura peut-être jamais combien les tonnes de bombes larguées sur l'Irak ont tué de personnes, civiles et militaires. Ce sont ces corps anonymes, ces corps calcinés et dont on a vu brièvement des images à la télévision, à qui ce texte voudrait rendre hommage. Il voudrait leur donner des noms et les inscrire sur une stèle pour le souvenir. Sans haine. Avec dignité. Jetés dans la fosse commune, ils feraient une sorte de visage anonyme qui contiendrait et rappellerait tous les absents.

Il fallait laver les mots, arracher l'herbe rouge qui scintille. Il fallait ciseler les images dans une

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 thousands 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.

It was necessary to wash the words, to uproot the glistening red grass, to chisel the images

mémoire récente et en même temps très vieille. Elles sont souvent nues et ont subi plusieurs déplacements. Elles ont voyagé, traversé les siècles et continuent de chercher asile entre l'émotion et la pudeur.

Chaque guerre laisse derrière elle des restes. Celle du Golfe en a laissé beaucoup. Et le monde, la conscience du monde ont déjà les yeux posés ailleurs. C'est une question de routine. Le monde des puissants—les États-Unis d'Amérique et leurs alliés—a pris l'habitude de se laver les mains et de rassurer sa conscience après avoir provoqué morts et destructions. Il rejoint en toute sérénité la logique du fossoyeur après avoir proclamé « la logique de guerre ».

Une fois qu'on a tiré une couverture de sable et de cendre sur des milliers de corps anonymes, on cultive l'oubli.

Alors la poésie se soulève. Par nécessité. Elle se fait parole urgente dans le désordre où la dignité de l'être est piétinée.

Mais les mots restent pâles quand la blessure est profonde, quand le chaos programmé est brutal et irréversible. Contre cela les mots. Et qu'y peuvent-ils?

Entre le silence meurtri et le balbutiement

onto a memory that is both recent and very old. The images are often naked and have endured many displacements. They have traveled, crossed centuries, and continue to seek shelter between emotion and humility.

Each war leaves behind remains. The Gulf War left many. As for the world, the conscience of the world has already set its eyes elsewhere. It is a matter of habit. The world of the powerful – the United States of America and its allies – 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.

So poetry rises. Out of necessity. Amidst the disorder where human dignity is trampled, poetry becomes urgent language.

But words pale when the wound is deep, when the well-planned chaos is brutal and irreversible. Against that, words. And what can they do?

Between murderous silence and desperate

désespéré, la poésie s'entête à dire. Le poète crie ou murmure ; il sait que se taire pourrait ressembler à un délit, un crime.

Il est une douleur millénaire qui rend notre souffle dérisoire. Le poète est celui qui risque les mots. Il les dépose pour pouvoir respirer. Cela ne rend pas ses nuits plus paisibles.

Nommer la blessure, redonner un nom au visage annulé par la flamme, dire, faire et défaire les rives du silence, voilà ce que lui dicte sa conscience. Il doit cerner l'impuissance de la parole face à l'extrême brutalité de l'histoire, face à la détresse de ceux qui n'ont plus rien, pas même la raison pour survivre et oublier.

Demain, des hommes, galons sur l'épaule, médailles sur la poitrine, un béret de général ou de maréchal, se réuniront devant une carte. Calmement, froidement, ils décideront d'avancer leurs troupes ici, ou là, envahissant un pays, massacrant des civils en leur sommeil, puis cela se passera en toute impunité, puisque ceux à l'origine du malheur se réuniront de nouveau face à la même carte pour cesser ce qu'ils appellent « les hostilités ». Et le

babbling, poetry stubbornly speaks. The poet shouts or murmurs; knows silence could be akin to an offense, a crime.

A very old suffering makes our breath pitiful. The poet is one who risks words. The poet sets them down in order to breathe. This does not make the nights easier.

To name the wound, to give a name again to the face voided by flame, to tell, to make and remake the borders of silence, that is what the poet's conscience dictates. The poet must consider the powerlessness of language in the face of history's extreme brutality, in the face of the suffering of those who have nothing left, not even a reason to survive and forget.

Tomorrow, men, stripes of braid on their shoulders, medals on their chests, with the berets of generals and marshals, will come together before a map. Calmly, coolly, they will decide to advance their troops here, or there, invading a country, massacring civilians in their sleep, and this will occur with utter impunity since those who have caused the suffering will then come together once again, before the same map, to end what they call "hostilities."

monde continuera de respirer comme il le fait depuis des millions d'années.

Qui parlera pour les ensevelis, les écorchés, les pendus, les jetés dans les fosses communes?

Les militaires en feront un paquet ficelé, abstrait, sur lequel ils inscriront le mot « Martyrs ». Et puis on oubliera. Forcément.

La poésie se contentera d'être là, pour être dite comme une prière, dans le silence, dans le recueillement du deuil.

Incommensurable est notre besoin de dire, même si nos paroles, emportées par le vent, iront buter contre les montagnes jusqu'à la perte du sens, jusqu'à faire des trous dans la roche et faire bouger les pierres lourdes de l'insomnie.

Tabar Ben Jelloun, Juin 1991

And the world will go on breathing as it has done for millions of years.

Who will speak for the buried, those flayed, those hung, those thrown into mass graves?

The armies will make them into a tidy parcel, an abstraction, on which they will inscribe the word "Martyrs." And then we will forget. Necessarily.

Poetry will content itself with being here, being said as a prayer, in silence, in the contemplation grief provokes.

Our need to speak is without measure, even if our words, taken by the wind, bash themselves against mountains until they are senseless, until they open holes in the rock and shift the heavy stones of insomnia.

Tabar Ben Jelloun, June 1991