FLARR Pages #64: The Poetry of Gezim Hajdari: A Sacred Non-Belonging

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In discussing the symbolic voyage between two languages—Albanian and Italian—that he and his poems undertake, Gëzim Hajdari writes: “It’s not a betrayal, but an enrichment. It is the point of departure for a true dialogue that tears down all national and territorial fences” (“Gëzim Hajdari, poeta migrante tra le terre e le lingue,” El Ghibli, www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it. All English translations are my own.) That Hajdari, who came to Italy as a refugee in 1992, operates successfully as a poet both in Albanian and in Italian, and that he in effect erases the line between the two activities, is in practice a rejection of the old Italian saw that suggests that any act of translation is an act of treason, not only against the original text, but perhaps also against a whole array of assumptions regarding the categories of original and translation, national literatures, and even against the possibility and necessity of establishing such distinctions. Indeed, Hajdari’s statement draws an immediate connection between translation/bilingualism and politics, between literary-linguistic and national borders.

Hajdari’s modernism is characterized by relentless work on poetic language as raw material: he often speaks of words as stones, as weapons cast against him, but also as a kind of figurative stone out of which existence is carved. Hajdari, while not reticent to insert his own body into his work, is keenly aware of having to construct his poetic persona with the material of language, in a careful process that involves a constant return to a core lexicon that evolves gradually over time. Indeed, certain, almost obsessive, terms recur in the poems to such an extent as to become keywords in the context of Hajdari’s poetics, going beyond the notion of theme to engage more deeply with problems of considerable importance for the vitality and relevance of poetry in contemporary culture. Perhaps most significantly, Hajdari’s poetry challenges the way we often approach literature—and especially migration literature—by resisting our desire to locate, particularly with regard to the traditional categories of belonging (whether national, literary, spiritual), the position from which the author is speaking. By blurring the distinction between original and translation, between physical and metaphysical exile, between self and other, between bodies and the shadows they cast, his work presents itself as a compelling analogue for the dispossessed existence of the exile (and not only the exile) in contemporary Western culture. In this sense, Hajdari’s poetry engages in an intense meditation on the mutually transformative relationship between literature and life and comes full circle in prompting us to consider the power of literature to struggle with issues we might refer to as biopolitical.

Upon publication of the collection Corpo presente (Present Body/Corpus, 1999), Hajdari was accused of adopting the position of a stateless individual in order to criticize the Albanian government: “Tu ti comporti da apolide / per piacere agli stranieri” (“You act like a man without a state / in order to please foreigners”; see Poema dell’esilio. Nuova edizione ampliata, Santarcangelo di Romagna: Fara, 2007, 43). His accusers no doubt had a
narrow understanding of the term *apolide* and no idea of the profound and positive implications of the position from which Hajdari speaks (and spoke, even before exile). In *Homo sacer: il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben elaborates the figure of the *homo sacer*, an element of Roman law defining an individual excluded from the *polis* and abandoned to divine judgment for having committed acts that compromise the peaceful relationship between Rome and the gods. In identifying not belonging, but exclusion as the originary political relation, Agamben helps us imagine a position from which to subvert the traditional relationship between “bare life” and “sovereign power.” Moreover, the sacredness of the *homo sacer*, of a biopolitical nature, mirrors that sacredness posited by Paolo Valesio for the condition of poetry in an age of translation: “The sacredness of poetry is not a national and initiatic sacredness anymore, a sacredness of the sublime and of the exceptional; it is, rather, a sacredness of the daily cultivation of the spirit as a fight against a pugnaciously anti-spiritual context” (“Poetry as Translation: Transpoetry,” in *Remapping the Boundaries: A New Perspective in Comparative Studies*, Bologna: CLUEB, 1997, 290).

In the dramatic poem “Maldiluna” (*Maldiluna / Dhimbjehene*, Nardo: Besa, 2005, 136-149), Hajdari embraces a similar figure of sacred exclusion: “I, Gëzim Hajdari / (creation of nighttime’s tremulous shadows, / accursed wanderer of sacred dwellings).” As he becomes blasphemer and perjurer before the gods, their ire is conveyed through the voice of the chorus. Over the course of the poem, in dialogue with this chorus, Hajdari’s confession becomes a raucous declaration of non-belonging:

I know what I am doing, my God
and I ask for no one’s grace,

I do not obey Your Disorder,
let the pyre come
and these verses as punishment from the Eternal.

In much of his work, the condition of statelessness clears the ground for a broad critique of a contemporary cultural and political environment, one shaped above all by the cynicism of the marketplace, where authenticity and community seem naïve ideals. Such a critique is often implicit, as in “Maldiluna”; elsewhere, as in the extraordinary *Poema dell’estilio*—part autobiography, part invective, part political history—it approaches the concreteness of historical analysis. However, Hajdari never loses sight of the individual’s body as bearer of the burden of culture itself.

Ultimately, through his text, Hajdari becomes that citizen of worlds to which he aspires, as the text accomplishes the transformation of the exile’s body into something outside of those categories that he has worked to dissolve. In his most recent collection, at the end of a long sequence of poems that recount the poet’s youth, Hajdari concludes with an extraordinary image depicting the productive annihilation of books and the self, as corpus and *corpo* again coincide:

Voglio che con le pagine dei miei libri
accendano il fuoco nella casa di
gli innamorati infreddoliti.

Farsi polvere,
cenerе,
oblio.
Sentirsi
un po’ se stessi,
un po’ universo.
Abitare il silenzio.

I want the pages of my books
to feed the fires in the cottages of cold lovers.

To become dust,
asheѕ,
oblivion.
To feel
in part oneself,
in part universe.
To inhabit silence.

(Peligorgа, Nardo: Besa, 2007, 107-109)

Perhaps ironically, the kind of community that Hajdari enables has less to do with the notion of the redemptive value of the exile’s life, as exemplar, than with his mission as poet, as guarantor of the authenticity of language amid the clamor of contemporary postmodern culture.

“Moonsickness”
(written for the voice of Amedeo di Sora)

I, Gëzim Hajdari

I, Gëzim Hajdari

I want the pages of my books
to feed the fires in the cottages of cold lovers.

To become dust,
asheѕ,
oblivion.
To feel
in part oneself,
in part universe.
To inhabit silence.

(Peligorgа, Nardo: Besa, 2007, 107-109)
accursed wanderer of sacred dwellings),
confess before the gods,
before the temples and oblivion.
I confess before the abandoned fields of my homeland
and the fires of Hell:
I am the mask of my mask,
and what I have written are lies,
it was not me
but one unworthy, delirious,
confined in an empty room.
I swear to this and excommunicate my accursed verses
wherever they may be
and ask forgiveness of my patient readers
for having taken them in
with my filth.

May all heaven's lightning
and the demons' wrath fall on you.
May Cerberus judge your tenebrous soul
among merciless flames.
You have lost our faith
your orphaned shade will wander winter's bogs
like a malevolent spirit,
may you never find peace in the land of men!
Rain will fall, snow and mire from above,
icy winds will blow on your Word,
black rivers will erase your name.
Step by step we will cover your traces with dust and stones,
and to oblivion you will be condemned
by your people!

Oh false seasons with broom flowers and scent of violets
in the bushes in spring
where the joyful sparrow chases the cuckoo,
brier rose,
poppies' petals
fallen in the land of crime,
paths lined with the hissing of snakes.
Oh years lost in the ruins of blackbirds and owls,
dark, dreadful labyrinths where I have wandered
like a melancholy monk
this entire time,
in the name of a Father who never became man.
Oh beautiful days consumed in vain
(in a castrated homeland)
throwing stones against the wind
and writing with the point of a knife on my skin
songs of love and pain.
Oh whirlwinds of enchanting dreams
that continue to murder ungrateful poets
without a war or drop of blood.

I, shadow of my shadow,
condemned to exile for another exile
curse the world
and spit in the face of a hypocrite, cruel God,
I have loved only my terror and not the song
of man.

But you, my sweet old woman,
continue to love me as always,
mention my name as you did every evening
in the small, damp house in the country
and pay no attention to what I write.
My brain is dismayed,
my thoughts poisoned,
and if I hang myself some dawn
it will be for a virgin whore,
for a poet life counts little,
it is death that matters.
I have decided to sell off this life
in exchange for a squalid poem,
but you, grace your favorite son
who loved the trees
tight against each other.
My name will return
and knock on your door each evening at dusk
like a bird seeking shelter from the rain,
like a fragile, regretful lover.

May your accursed word be chastised throughout
the realm of the living
and may your bitter seed be kept from taking root
in the land of Adam,
repent of the horrible sin,
that merciful God might absolve you!

I have always lived among my fellow men
solitary and foreign to them,
fascinated by my madness
and by the birds' tender eyes,
celebrating my dark, clear ashes
under the light of a frightened moon,
witness to atrocious crimes.
Like an assassin on the run,
crossing regions of snow,
loudly claiming my power
in a blind, morbid silence.
Laugh, valley,
and hide my panic,
rise up, hill,
and cover my terror,
take root, dismal season
and destroy my prescient dreams.
With the courtyard's robin
that chases me in the dazzle of ice
I share my torment
in a pallid autumn.
No one believes in my joy,
days for me are closed skies of stone
and nights a paradise of orgies.
The first I met in my childhood
were that hawks of my hill,
they fed on larks in the fields
and I took joy in the victims' tears,
I placed crowns of broom on my head
and passed before the predators' battle
like a conquering king.
Whoever failed to applaud with me was a
coward,
this is who I am,
I have adored the smiling faces of tyrants
and hated before loving.
Come forward, my cruel loves
bite into my innocent skin
stone my brown eyes
set fire to my anguish,
until my cries are appeased
and your wicked will is done.
What are you waiting for,
nail me with my Words
until I bleed
thrash my body with my verses,
hang my red heart
on the branches
before I, crow of crows
enter your veins
to drink your impure blood,
and rise up a monster.

Oh, we are hearing unprecedented, blasphemous
things
in this night of icy stars,
while the first rooster crows toward the Orient:
you will die far from your dark land,
destroyed by the sorrow of an immense exile,
mortal thorns will grow from your ashes.

I am a stranger in transit,
I regret nothing in your realm of damnation
and claim another destiny.
I know the secrets of a faithless life
as the weapon knows its murderous act,
there is no poison to calm my madness
given to me by the Father
before I became
the son of cannibals
in the promised desert.

Stabbed by the faithful
in a dark night
of communion

and betrayal,
I show the people my bleeding wound:
desire for a deliberate mystery.

Since the day I lost Atlantis
I have wandered aimlessly streets and fields
covering in my hands my obsession
and moonsickness,
setting fire to
alphabets,
ero,
farewells.
Time's oblivion, save me.

I know what I am doing, my God
and I ask for no one's grace,
I, goat farmer,
dweller of ex-farming co-ops of darkness
and thunder,
who once chased after seasons and shadows,
I do not obey Your Disorder,
let the pyre come
and these verses as punishment from the Eternal.

(Translated by Viktor Berberi)