

ANDRÉE CHEDID: DIALOGUE AND THE DESTRUCTION OF FORM

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The dynamic of Andrée Chedid's poetry arises from the tension between a personal spiritual imperative and implacable laws which govern the human community:

At the limit of the hollow gesture
And the humble look
Of tired hearts and empty sleep
On the edge of rancid dawns and faithless paths
Devastating the plains of silence
My eye in the eye of death
There is
My revolt (*Textes* n.p.)¹

In her poems a constant evocation not only of the problematic present, but of the past -- of the cumulative power of evolution, of the mind's archetypes, of the generations of the dead reborn in our flesh - seems continually to oppose new creation. Against this background of absolute limitation, how do we come to believe in the revolt she announces, with its faith in the possibilities for human liberty and new expression? How do the poems argue against a merciless fate, against that Absolute which appears to offer an escape from the discontinuities of the mortal condition, but which instead reinforces our despair? The destruction of this tyranny involves a resolve to call into question our own desire for final solutions, a resolve not to escape but to interrogate.

This interrogation takes the form of a determined dialogue no longer silenced by the evasion of limits. The quality and character of Chedid's poetic voice suggest that her identity has its source in continual questioning of a world which surpasses personal and private

concerns. The focus on what *we* are about and what *you* are doing in the larger context underscores the tension arising from constant confrontation of limits circumscribing all our experience. In fact, the lyric energy of her poems arises from the embrace of those conditions which confine us within our mortality, a paradoxical recognition that our power lies in a refusal to dream beyond them. By addressing death and the dissolution of forms, Chedid engages us in a process where destruction of closure affirms the construction of form, where form recognizes its own pretensions to the absolute. In Lacanian terms, we might say that Chedid submits the *méconnaissance* of the Imaginary to its own Symbolic construction and lets signification slide.

This sliding signification when confronted and recognized seems to incite a kind of energy past despair. It is actually a means of perception, of dialogue as a process of continual interrogation, a liberating focus. In one of her earliest poems, Chedid retells the myth of Icarus in the form of a dialogue. The voice of the sun calls Icarus: ". . . only you can leave your flesh and your house / like a fresh corpse his winding sheet . . . leave these kingdoms without enigma where days slam one against the other like / shutters of a complacent house . . ." Icarus hears and responds:

I know we must go

Go and then does it matter

Go still going

Where all our lives mingle

Dream and blood are one

What does clarion laughter matter

Pools without sun

And death does it matter

Death, easy death, this multiple lamp. (*Textes* n.p.)

He knows his end will be absorption in sun and sea. But in the meantime, he will have become the bird, the winged one, a mad being, a somber harvest. In this dialogue which ends in loss of form, the essential revelation involves the multiplicity, the artistry and artifice of forms dying and being reborn throughout the universe. Even death, especially death, will not be a single event, not an apocalyptic, redemptive End, but an infinite series of endings multiplied as light would be in an endless hall of mirrors.

The poem, "movement," begins with an exhortation to "forge the contrary of this world" where the soul grows mute, where time shrivels us. The energy of the exhortation seems to depend on two things: the poet's faith in our ability to create a new response to life, and her encounter with the force of all that opposes us. We are urged to "give birth" to ourselves, to make a new form for ourselves, to communicate with those around us who will necessarily remain Other: "Give birth to yourself / Traverse yourself / Kindle this word which faces man / And reaches toward him" (*Poèmes* 63). The poem, like dialogue itself, urges a destruction of limits which the poet's ego might impose. Unlike Sade's evaluation of the beauty of movement as crime, or Hegel's Sage at the end of history, *all* of Chedid's exhortations place us in a middle ground more allied with Pascal's limited being who recognizes intuitively his connection to energies exceeding him on all sides.

In this shifting, sliding ground, form of all kinds is continuously destroyed and reborn. Much of Chedid's poetry focuses on such transformations: "Traverse yourself, untie the movement, give birth to yourself . . ." Through all these metamorphoses, the energy of creative vision persists. In fact, continual destruction forces a focus directed at renewal. At this level, there is no separation possible between destruction and creation. The sacrifice of this separation recalls the restricted economy of a system to its own general and original ecstasy, or as Bataille might say, it no longer delays the sacred. The energy that fuels our desire to find resolution exceeds, is greater than, all our resolutions can ever be. As Bataille observes, our labor, our language, social organization, sexuality, truth, and our poetry, are restricted economies which not only aspire to, but produce more than they can contain. In the very effort of attempting to maintain themselves, they will surpass themselves. In the poem, "proofs in black and gold," a world knotted in its own savagery and death erupts into ecstasy:

The body stops

Blood hardens

Faces, hands knot

In folds of death

Here

Glistening with green shadows

Enlaced in holiday

Pleasure

Streams down

The shoulders of summer. (*Poèmes* 187)

In "season of men," Chedid evokes certain qualities related to the heart -- hopes, dreams of the future, thirsts, desires for exploration and conquest, our capacity for amazement. She shows these countered at every turn by disaster, abandonment, disgrace, disillusionment and finally, death. These stark, unforgiving limits intensify her realization at the poem's conclusion: "The dice being explicit and death sovereign / I am amazed to believe in our season" (*Textes* 200). Once again, the force of everything opposing us serves to intensify her resolve, here arising from the sense of our "amazing" persistence in the face of constant and intense metamorphoses.

"Depths of the face" imagines a series of limited forms and occasions through which the poet attempts to read the face of her lover:

Not in a single time

Will I know your face

Not in seven

Nor in a hundred nor a thousand . . .

Not in our bodies together

Will I know your body

Not our meetings

Not even our denials

Clarify your being

Greater than its mirrors. (*Poèmes* 234)

Instead of these approaches, the poet opts in favor of relying on two energies which may alter or destroy the form of what she seeks to know: "It's everything that escapes me / Everything that flees from you / . . . It's everything that delivers you / From the burden of our past / . . . It's more, this flash of light: Your buried freedom / Your limits burning ahead" (*Poèmes* 234). These two energies, internal light and fire as keys to knowing, or, paradoxically, to recognizing the impossibility of knowing another being, reveal what Chedid most values in her appraisal of us: that vision which cannot be held or described, that *insight* which defies and destroys barriers including those imposed by words even as we articulate them. This literally critical realization is the ground for hope and liberty, for a writing that realizes in crisis its radically provisional nature. Inhabiting limits, though not inhibited by them, Chedid's poetry maintains a vision strikingly similar to Pascal's affirmation that even human misery is anchored in greatness. It is the "suffering of an exiled king," pointing directly to a universe beyond and at the same time within our comprehension. As Pascal concludes, "Let us endeavor, then, to think well" (488).

Limits are not barriers, but spaces of recognition, of understanding and realization. Choice of perspective in the poem "by our look" alters our perception of form and influences its creation: "Steeped in today / Our look increases / By this creation it absorbs / By these worlds it engulfs" (*Poèmes* 77). Poetry and history are works in process, acts of investigation rather than the production of a completed work, of an *oeuvre*. In this context, *seeing* becomes the source of poetry and in itself

is the process of dialogue with surfaces, interrogation of depths, listening to the meaning of the past. For example, in the poem "primal face," past forms are tentative because: "Now rings aloud, troubling our roots, unweaving threads, inventing the unknown road," concluding with the lines, "Let's outrun our skin / for other thresholds / Let blood's memory / Stand watch / Without diminishing the day" (*Poèmes* 15). Chedid suggests that form is undone rather than merely realized by the process of history which continually and often ruthlessly shifts the course of the self and its vision.

By resisting the temptation to make our work and its daily disasters the holocaustic completion of a History, we manage, as Blanchot implies, to *write* the disaster, to tolerate its "essential solitude" in limitless responsibility to its Otherness. Reverdy says, "We stroll elegantly along the void and don't fall in" (29): that is, we avoid that fall in a forward movement which destroys the arrogance of form, liberating it out of nothing if for no other reason than its gratuitous, lyrical elegance. In Chedid's poem, "a river inhabits us," silence and formlessness are prelude to this liberation, this end to the tyranny of form. "How many darkened hours will we have to cross . . . / Dissolve how many shadows / Unclench how many beaks and claws / To penetrate this water . . . And immerse ourselves for a long time" (*Poèmes* 91). The poem is a journey to silence, an arrival at non-form, a recognition of the necessity of formlessness to the production of form.

This radical nature of form is crucial to understanding "Proofs of the builder." Here Chedid sees that in the creative process, certain gifts permit our creations to "outdistance time," though by no means to become timeless: "Master of spectacles / Time pursues time / Building our erosion / Yet other eyes pierce / the patinas of age / Certain laughs outrun the grandeur of verse" (*Poèmes* 186). First, there is our capacity to see and contact what remains fresh beneath the surface of ourselves and our creations. Then, critical distance allows us to laugh at grandeur when its tone no longer suits those creations. Finally, there is the surprising capacity we have on singular occasions to create something which overcomes our brilliance, exposing it to its own blindness: "But another voice strips/the word of froth / Certain gestures / remain prodigious / Outdistancing time" (*Poèmes* 186).

Within this critical reflection, the poet must be willing to abandon control, to enter into crisis. In "Tides III" Chedid observes that "All is

flux and reflux / The carnivorous shadow / Dogs the heels of every light" (*Par delà* 55). Form transcends the poet only insofar as it passes through her like a fire, shaping her even as it abandons her. The ego is subsumed under the dynamic of that energy which continues but is not the form itself: "Everything is a path / That breach that breaches us / Arriving like a fire" (*Par Delà* 55). Transcendence gives way to an immanence that suffuses the world with the possibility, the contingency, of form rather than its absolute regime.

The insistence we have observed here on the alternation of construction and destruction, form and formlessness, might easily have led, in other authors, works, or contexts, to floundering or existential despair. But for Chedid, consent to the inevitability of these alternations opens a climate of affirmation. Her acceptance of periodicity is, at bottom, a recognition of desire, of the grace of an assured continuity rising endlessly from our discontinuous yearning. At this level, our impulse to create form originates in a realm within us which remains far beyond our control and produces works which surpass our intentions. Nowhere is this certainty of continuing creation clearer than in "The Cry:"

Up by its bootstraps

From the bloodbaths of history

The Cry

Unearths our roots

Torn from our smothering madness

It snares our breath

And sears our mouths

In the fire of our lying words. (*Par Delà* 33)

Despite ourselves, and in even the most tragic of dilemmas, we give birth to this Cry which becomes our art, our poetry. We may be reminded here of Bonnefoy's definition of poetry as "the greatest cry

a man ever attempted" (81), of the poet's choice of a wordless *sound* to stand for our creative power. This choice points once more to what we have discovered in our analysis: that the source of Chedid's capacity for affirmation is her belief in the continual welling up within us of that immanent force which precedes form. Its life incinerates our pretenses and our plans. In fact, our "disastrous" decision to allow ourselves to be breached by desire guarantees our continuity. More broadly, the "breaching" itself recalls Chedid's resolute opening to dialogue with the Other, her realization that such openings require continual destruction and recreation of forms.

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NOTES

¹ English translations of Chedid's poetry in this text originate from Goodhart, Lynne and Jon Wagner. *Fugitive Suns: Poetry of Andrée Chedid*. Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1997.

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