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Omar S. Pound, Arabic and Persian Poems in Translation

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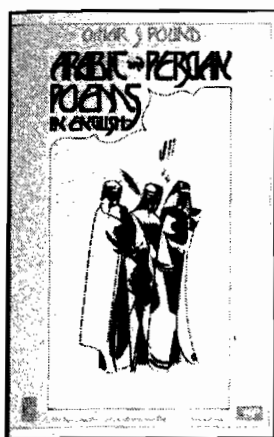
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ARABIC AND PERSIAN POEMS, by Omar S. Pound. New and expanded edition. Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation; Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1986. 123 pages. Cloth; \$22.00. Paper: \$12.00.

Fifteen years have passed since the first publication of Omar Pound's *Arabic and Persian Poems*. A second edition would be in order even if it didn't contain seventeen additional poems, including a 14th-century Persian mock-epic entitled "Gorby and the Rats" — a political satire apparently based on the Mongol occupation of Persia, and it tells of a redoubtable cat whose

tail was borrowed from a lion
his paws were golden eagle's claws
his chest a silver shield
and every whisker was a sword.

The poem climaxes in a great pitched battle between cats and rats on "the open Plains of Fars," where "both armies met and fought/paw to paw." War imagery is never far off in these poems, especially the ones from the Arabic. "Gorby" gives full play to the language of belligerence while dissolving the horror of mass slaughter in the pacifism of parody.

Omar Pound possesses the one thing that separates the true translator from the mere "Englischer": the willingness to *listen* to the voice of an alien culture. He not only penetrates to the heart of Arab and Persian societies; he is also able to enter the minds of the many individuals who in-

habit these poems. Arabic and Persian poets knew that certain themes were far more moving when offered through "personae." Several pieces in this collection make use of this device. There is the lament of an aged Arab for the razing of his encampment, and of a father for five sons lost in a plague:

I turn at night from back to belly
side after side after side.

Who put pebbles on my couch when my sons died?

In that last line Omar manages to catch hold of some of the values and manners of another culture — what Lionel Trilling called the "hum and buzz of implication" — and bring them over into English tonalities. "Lament for a Brother" by Al-Khansa', a 7th-century woman poet, addresses death directly and poignantly: "What have we done to you, death/that you treat us so." There are less sombre personae here too, for example in "An Arab Chieftain to His Young Wife" and the "Complaint to a Court Poet." And in the longish narrative poem "Calling the Doctor" we meet, along with several others, the famous Avicenna. Basil Bunting, who translated Persian poetry himself, thought highly of Pound's version of this piece.

Persian and Arabic poetry is relentlessly metaphorical and "conceitful." But the breathless ingenuity of Donne will be of no help to the English translator here; a different mood and tone must be consulted:

White hairs
are the voice
of the wind of death
and with them comes
 despair

they shudder the willow
of my heart. . . .

There is an alert delicacy in these lines unusual in English poetry, possibly because we are less patient about the aging process, possibly because it is difficult for us to be nobly "old" the way a Persian who died around 1200 could be. Nobility is a word that applies to most of these poems. Whether dirgeful or raucous, they are

suffused with a subtle piety, a persistent awareness of Allah which Pound captures impressively. His own poems frequently make use of a curious ironic archaism, a tongue-in-cheek propriety, which is well-fitted to the tone of these writers. In one piece, by the Arab Abu Nuwas, a rake invokes God even as he rails against a ban on wine:

Fools, why not let me be,
drinking with every toy in town,
 don't thwart Allah
the world could end tomorrow
with you regretting purity,
while I will surely be
worthy of His Clemency.

While faithfully rendering the pious abstractions and honorifics dear to the Islamic mind, Pound's translations are vital as English poems, and he does not hesitate to substitute modernity for antiquity when he wants to sustain the pace and mood set by his own language:

Even the gods resent my paradise
a cottage with thrushes in the loft
and senior civil servants beg me back
to dine at Claridge's
and view the dogs at Cruft's.
 (From "Hors de Combat")

Arabic and Persian Poems contains 54 pieces in all. Usually Pound gives the poem entire, but in a few cases he has offered a distillation of the original or a synthesis of two or more poems. This volume is handsomely printed, and the dust-jacket premieres an ink drawing by Wyndham Lewis entitled "Three Arabs" (ca. 1925), originally intended for T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* but never used. There is a lengthy introduction which is both informative and engaging, and an appendix containing useful biographical notes on the poets.