

Who Needs a Story? Contemporary Eritrean Poetry in Tigrinya, Tigre and Arabic

TRANS. CHARLES CANTALUPO AND GHIRMAI NEGASH, WITH OTHERS.

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War and Peace in Contemporary Eritrean Poetry

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Eritrea is a small Horn of Africa country that gained its independence after a difficult and protracted war with neighboring Ethiopia. The country's small size and its recent arrival on the international scene as a free country notwithstanding, Eritrea boasts a rich literary tradition that spans centuries. It has also a long history of written literature that in the words of Charles Cantalupo in *War and Peace* extends over "thousands of years" (1). Yet Eritrea's poetry is still marked by its ubiquitous orality. In the words of Reesom Haile, "[Eritrean] poetry is not something that has left our tongue and lived in the books for a very long time." Poetry in Eritrea is enjoyed in the town or village square by all citizens, who are not passive listeners but who participate vociferously in the making of the poetry. To understand this communal contour of Eritrean poetry, we must understand the role of the poet in society. As Cantalupo explains, the Eritrean word for poet, "getamay (masculine), getamit (feminine)," means a "joiner."

Who Needs a Story? is an anthology of thirty-seven poems—twenty-four in Tigrinya, three in Tigre, and ten in Arabic—by twenty-two poets of all stripes,

persuasions, and professions. The poets have one thing in common: they either participated in the struggle for independence as warriors or supported the liberation struggle indirectly. Not all the poems, however, focus on the war and its aftermath. Altogether the poems reflect and document in poetic language the different phases of a nation in the throes of dramatic changes. Informed and shaped by lived reality, the poems reflect pain without being lachrymose.

The anthology aptly opens with Meles Negusse's Tigrinya poem "We Miss You, Mammet"—Mammet being "the traditional Eritrean Muse of poetry" (Cantalupo 72). The opening poem frames the issues with which the rest of the poems in the collection grapple. The poet here shows how regnant conditions circumscribe the kind of poetry on offer. In a landscape where mourners abound, the poet intimates, "Not a single riff / Of [mammet's] melodies remain" (1). Under such circumstances, the mourners are all too quick to assume that Mammet is dead, and with her death, "Poetry is declared dead." Yet by invoking the muse, the poet knows that poetry is sustenance for the Eritrean individual and collective imagination. What the poet points to and away from is a pervasive existential angst and anguish that numbs the poetic sense of citizens. All hope is not lost, as the poet cajoles the muse, "Still we crave / . . . / For the mysterious power / Of your voice to return" and implores her to imbue "the poetry of today" with "your spirit / And sound of joy." From this opening poem, the anthology signals the range of poems that populates its pages. The poems cover the gamut of human emotions and, taking their cue from the opening poem, deal with pain, beauty, fear, with loss of identity, of voice, of dignity. Above all, the poems celebrate the resilience of the human mind and will.

Who Needs a Story? is the first Eritrean anthology of its kind. There is no doubt that any endeavor that is the first of its kind partially fills a lacuna, and, in the process, whets the appetite of readers for more. The translators and editors are aware of this and intimate that there are similar projects in the offing. The seminal idea of translating Eritrean poetry into English owes its genesis to "Against All Odds," the monumental gathering of writers and scholars in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, in January 2000. The gathering in Asmara called for a new way of advancing the linguistic and literary interests of the African people. "In short," writes Cantalupo in *War and Peace*, "the Asmara Declaration is the theory, and *Who Needs a Story?* is the practice" (4). The anthology signals a fruitful praxis that points to and paves the way for similar undertakings that will put into practice the salient principles and tenets expounded in the Asmara Declaration.

Who Needs a Story? is a collaborative and communal work—"I seemed like one person in a Renaissance workshop / Doing my part on a massive painting, only the subject/Was war and peace in the Eritrean struggle to survive" (137). The success of the anthology rests on the deep commitment of the translators and editors to a work ethic put in motion and sustained by a belief in the project's value to African literature and beyond. To that end, the translators and editors guard against the twin curses of all translations: an "imitative" translation that "patronizes authenticity" and an equally flawed endeavor that produces an "unreadable, artless and even meaningless" translation. In this anthology, the translators manage to avoid both pitfalls. The poems reveal artistic merit and showmanship while at the same time foregrounding the individual poet's intention and meaning. This kind of accomplishment demonstrates the meticulous

work—over a three-year period—that has gone into the selection, preparation and execution of the project.

A reader would have liked to see the inclusion of oral poetry as an independent and viable category in the anthology. Certainly, Zeineb Yassin and Saba Kidane's performance pieces are clear testimony that orality is not wholly absent from the anthology. The translators and editors anticipated such criticism. Their response:

After careful consideration and much discussion, we finally made a decision to include only written poetry and not Eritrean oral poetry, which has a long and rich tradition, and which is still very important and persuasive in Eritrea. An objection to this critical decision would surely be just. We firmly believe that the depth, breadth and high quality of Eritrean oral poetry warrant a translation project and an edition of its own. (viii)

Here the translators and editors envision a day when they will embark on a massive project that will delineate the "Eritrean verbal genome [which will] include all of Eritrea's languages as well as their performative and literary dimensions." (viii)

In *War and Peace*, Cantalupo reiterates the collaborative spirit and the precursorial contour of the anthology. *War and Peace* shares a destiny with the anthology in that it is the first critical work on the subject (xi). Because of its proemial nature, *War and Peace* is "a kind of reader's guide to the poems in *Who Needs a Story?*" with three exceptions. The book discusses two poems not included in the anthology, the first of which is by the late Zeineb Yassin, a "veteran fighter in Eritrea's armed struggle for independence" and who was/is affectionately referred to as Mother Zeineb. "Under a Sycamore," a poem in Tigre, is "a partial transcription of her performance on 16 January 2000 at the 'Against All Odds' literary festival and conference in Eritrea" (xi). The second exception is a performance poem by a poet who already has three of her poems included in the anthology. The third exception is of a different nature. *War & Peace* devotes a whole chapter to the work of Reesom Haile. This is warranted by the international acclaim the late poet had garnered, and the books of poetry he had published.

War and Peace is divided into five chapters, a reprise, and an appendix that has a selection of poems from *Who Needs a Story?* (140–55). Chapter one gives a detailed description of the tortuous path that *Who Needs a Story?* traveled, before its reincarnation as a print-on-demand text in the US by the venerable Africa Book Collective, which is set up to "support publishing in Africa" (15). Cantalupo's musing on the subject of publishing and Africa's role in the enterprise we call globalization is suitable food for thought. The chapter sheds light on the complex and often intriguing nuances of book publishing. It is a chapter worth reading by anyone who wishes to see the text "not merely as a commodity but also as an artifact" (13). The ideas in this chapter are also developed in Cantalupo's long poem "Non-Native Speaker" in the reprise (134–38), which renders in poetic form Cantalupo and Ghirmai Negash's involvement in the anthology project, and their sometimes humorous and ironic endeavor to get an ISBN for *Who Needs a Story?* The endeavor is a tall order for both since "Copyright in Eritrea was discouraged since the war—/ Smacking of ego and counter-revolutionary, too." And without an ISBN, a book would not see the light of day in other far-flung markets. Thus,

"Ghirmai insisted I make sure Zemhret knew we must have it. / Globalization required a book have an ISBN" (138).

Chapter two deals with the work of four poets, two in Tigrinya, one in Tigre, and one in Arabic, written by the oldest poet in *Who Needs a Story?* Cantalupo shows how the poets whose work is analyzed in this chapter call for a privileging of the war effort in the consciousness of the Eritrean people. Remembering is the duty of the living, for as George Eliot said, "the dead do not die / until their death is forgotten." Solomon Drar's Tigrinya poem "Who Said Merhawi Is Dead?" captures this sense of the martyr's ". . . blood / Shimmering in our veins" (67; qtd. in *War and Peace* 22). Drar's Merhawi is the Invincible, the eponymous hero of Mussa Mohammed Adem's Tigre poem. Yet Adem's hero strikes back only when his dignity is violated, at which moment "he feels his first scar burning again" (87; qtd. in Cantalupo 25). The enraged invincible warrior roars his way to victory in Mohammed Osman Kajerai's Arabic poem "Singing Our Way to Victory." Kajerai's poem brings to mind Roque Dalton's words "Poetry / Forgive me for having helped you understand / You're not made of words alone."

The chapter closes with Fessahazion Michael's Tigrinya poem "Naqra," "about the infamous, desolate island in the Red Sea off the Eritrean coast" (32). It is a poem that exudes pain, yet the poet's tone is an exhortation to posterity: not to forget those prisoners of conscience who "Succumbed in despair / On Naqra." This chapter contextualizes the long struggle of the Eritrean people. The focus is on the war poetry, woven out of empirical reality. These poems form what Cantalupo, borrowing from Simone Weil, calls "a poetics of force" (24). The poems show that there is no paean without pain.

Chapter three is aptly called "War and Peace," in that it forms a bridge that straddles the two chapters that frame it. It is the longest chapter in the book and focuses on poets "whose works blend war and peace" (37). Isayas Tsegai's Tigrinya poem "I Am Also a Person" laments the lack of compassion and empathy in the auditor/the world. It is an indictment of a conspiratorial silence that does not condemn evil when it sees it. And while the tone of the poet is harsh, the reader cannot miss the generosity of the speaker, which, perhaps to our amazement, affirms life with syllogistic arguments that establish a common humanity with the auditor: "I am also a person. I'm an Eritrean." When even a modicum of hope is not warranted, the poet seems to say, I keep my perspective and remind myself and you (the world) that I'm also a person. This is a subtle indictment of the world that ignores the plight of the poet's people considering that, as a South African proverb has it, "A person is a person, only because of other people." By ignoring my plight, the poet seems to be saying, you are negating the backcloth that binds us humans. The poets in this chapter deal with loss and pain in a way that does not lead to any physical or intellectual catalepsy. Instead, they encourage and exhort their listeners/readers to persevere. This exhortation is succinctly expressed in the concluding lines of Ahmed Omar Sheikh's Arabic poem—the last poem in the anthology: "Fight for what you've lost/And find the voice to bring it back" (133; qtd. in Cantalupo 67). Cantalupo rightly characterizes the tone and tenor of these poets as elegiac. And elegy, as a Somali adage has it, is the voice of the survivor.

Chapter four is entitled "Peace." With the advent of "peace," however, the struggle does not come to an end, but assumes different shapes and nuances. It is

a different form of struggle, but one that is no less arduous, no less protracted. It is a struggle with life's elemental necessities, with one's foibles and weaknesses, with familial and filial tensions; in short, with life's vicissitudes. These are, writes Cantalupo, "poetic subjects that need not be tied to or contextualized within explicit nationalistic or political concerns" (80). The poems in this chapter reframe the issues raised in Tsegai's poem "I Am Also a Person" in a new dialectical form. The "enemy" that now denies you identity and life is not only from without, but also from within. The "enemy," as the beggar mother in Saba Kidane's poem tells her son, is "Your father." Both mother and son are reduced to a life of penury, living out their lives begging on the curbside on a city street. The mother's worst nightmare comes to pass when the son tries to mimic her, as he "put[s] his hand to play / . . . / Her begging in his own way" (35). The mother quickly and instinctively thwarts the son's deadly game by diverting his attention to a more innocuous and innocent game: "Les's play peek-a-boo or. . ."

The poets in this chapter deal with the pangs of unrequited love (Mohammed Said Osman's Tigre poem "Juket"), or suggestive (explicit?) erotic indulgence (Abdel Hakim Mahmud El Sheikh's Arabic poem "Breaths of Saffron on Broken Mirrors"), or the painful predicament of illegal immigrants (Ghirmai Yohannes San Diego's "Like Sheep"). The chapter closes with San Diego's "Who Needs a Story?" which fittingly gives the anthology its overall title. Reading San Diego's "Who Needs a Story?" one is hard pressed to ever complain about the accursed writer's block—"I already have a story / That nobody knows and it's great— / I am the story" (79).

Chapter five focuses on the work of the renowned Eritrean poet, the late Reesom Haile. In this chapter, Cantalupo talks about his first encounter with the poet in 1998 in Asmara. He shows how writing in Tigrinya is for Haile a willed, conscious decision: "Writing in Tigrinya, Reesom Haile joins and becomes a leader in the growing movement of African authors who are now writing in African languages" (125), an important endeavor, for, as Cantalupo writes, "The simplest, fairest, most democratic, economic and achievable way to improve African lives and livelihoods through the application of knowledge, science, technology, research and analysis is the empowerment of African languages" (127). Cantalupo designates his translation work in Eritrean poetry with these words: "Non-native speaker who practices enabling, more simply, / Translating, getting it into print and noticed by the world" (135). The word "enabling" recurs in the poem four or five times, befitting both the humility of the writer while soundly connecting the poem to the Reprise—with its etymology in music—under whose aegis it falls. Cantalupo in the process becomes the enabler [read: translator]. But this translator who swore in 1970 that "I should know my culture" (134), comes to agree with Goethe's dictum that one would not be able to claim to know his/her culture without knowing other cultures. Cantalupo's epiphany came fifteen years later, first, in the vicinity of Africa—in Jericho—and was solidified in Cairo: "I was in Africa, and the bottom (literally, if / You think of it geographically) was falling out of / My oath to only know what I thought essentially was me" (134).

That said, at times it seemed to this reviewer that the enabler doth protest too much. In carving a niche for Eritrean poetry and in appealing to his target audience, Cantalupo in *War and Peace* occasionally sounds like an apologist who tries his best to sell the merits of his cherished literature. Playing on the meaning

of the Italian adage—*traduttore/traditore*—both Cantalupo and Negash opt to be traders “offering as fairly and equally as possible, one kind of cultural artifact for another” (*Who Needs a Story* vi). Perhaps they become too much the trader and less the traitor in packaging Eritrean literature. Certainly this is not their fault, since we live in a world of unequal opportunity in the circulation of ideas and books. Yet there will come a day, as both Cantalupo and Negash intimate, when no caveats will be necessary to introduce an anthology in an African language to an English-speaking audience. There will come a time when a buyer in some Barnes & Noble will be musing: “‘*Who Needs a Story?* What’s that? . . . // I never heard of this. Let me buy it. I kind of like it’” (*War and Peace* 137).

A few typographical errors in *War and Peace* must be mentioned here, so that a second edition of the book, which I’m sure will soon be warranted, will be free of them. On page 14, the last sentence on the page should read: “Economically, at least, if not . . .” instead of “at least, a if”); page 15, the long quote, second line, “of” instead of “off”; page 32, “Yet in the poem’s” instead of “the poems”; page 100, the biographical information on Abdul Hakim Mahmoud El Sheikh, “Born in 1966” instead of “1996,” and on page 107, the middle paragraph: the title of San Diego’s poem is “Next Time Ask” and not “Asks”; and on page 121, “everyone is a potential poet” and not “everyone is a potential a poet.” These are minor errors in a book of 175 pages, and do not negatively reflect on the diligence and care of the book’s copy editors/proofreaders.

Cantalupo and Negash’s work internationalizes Eritrean literature. *Who Needs a Story?* demonstrates how good translations achieve their brilliance by what David Damrosch, paraphrasing Andre Lefevere, calls “refract[ing] their originals” (*What Is World Literature?* 167). It is a refraction, I would argue, that, even when the work is “received into the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture’s national tradition and the present need of its own writers,” does not force the work to lose much of its refractoriness. The work is able to preserve both the consanguinial or affiliation strategies demanded by its source and accommodate the domestication or exoticization maneuvers/attempts of the host culture. Thus, the refraction implied here is “a double refraction, one that can be described through the figure of the ellipse, with the source and the host cultures providing the two foci that generate the elliptical space within which a work lives as world literature, connected to both cultures, circumscribed by neither alone” (283). With this anthology, Eritrean literature joins the ever-growing corpus of African literature that crosses borders while retaining its contextual framework. Both Cantalupo and Negash guard against the dual risks that Friedrich Schleiermacher warns against, namely, the risk of “mov[ing] the writer toward the reader” or vice versa. Indeed, a good translation like Cantalupo and Negash’s *Who Needs a Story* graces us, as Vilashini Cooppan succinctly puts it, with a work that is at once “locally inflected and translocally mobile” (qtd. in Damrosch 22). One thing is clear from both *Who Needs a Story* and *War and Peace*: humanity thrives and benefits from a robust exchange of ideas, which comes into fruition when entities—individuals, nations—speak their minds and translation projects are both equitably encouraged and adequately funded. If globalization is touted as the free movement and circulation of ideas, people, commodities, then translations must become the real and symbolic currency of that enterprise. The alternative is dreary and catastrophic for, in the words of Reesom Haile:

If we fail
To keep it free,
Not giving everyone,
A say, remember
Babel—it fell. (qtd. in Cantalupo131)

Both books are published in Africa and are distributed in the United States and beyond by the African Books Collective. These are important additions to the corpus of African-language literatures. I am looking forward to using them in my classes.

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