

Salah Stétié

COLD WATER SHIELDED

Selected poems

Edited and translated by Michael Bishop

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Salah Stétié (b 1929) by no means conceals the mystical postulates of his hermetic poetry. In the title poem of this generous bilingual selection (from fifteen books published between 1973 and 1995), the Lebanese diplomat announces: "Of that which is written I know / Nothing / - Speech is drawn up in airlessness." The Francophone poet combines Sufistic as well as obsessive personal symbols in a paradoxical struggle to get beyond the self, rationality, knowledge, indeed symbolism, and attain the kind of purity described in one poem as akin to "a ladder of imagination returning / In joy to the wood of its intrinsicness".

These polysemous lines can perhaps be rendered more simply as "an imagined ladder that returns / Joyfully to its natural wood", a version revealing how Stétié resembles other French poets - Bonnefoy, du Bouchet, or Dupin - concerned about the ontological foundations of the world and its objects. If Middle Eastern atmospheres occasionally envelop *Cold Water Shielded*, a few of them even including political turmoil, Stétié's writing mainly explores the "House of Being" and the

nite articles (or the lack thereof), sometimes defeat the translator; he even, at times, parallels the French syntactic rule that adjectives tend almost always to be placed after the noun. Laughable semantic ambiguities crop up: "l'amour aux cils baissés" becomes "lowlidded love" and "O veuve ornée devenue forme d'arbre" comes out as "Oh adorned widow become treed form".

Nor is it clear why the "gardée" of the title, *L'Eau froide gardée*, means "shielded" - if all the connotations of the English adjective are taken into account. Even if this interpretation is defensible, Bishop systematically construes *garder* as "to shield", even in contexts where the verb means something else. In "Ses doigts gardés par des vivants d'automne", for example, the bride's fingers are arguably "watched over", not "shielded", by "autumnal beings". It is a pity that no surer-footed translator has been found for this difficult, sometimes obscure, yet philosophically resonant poetry that, as Stétié himself quips, is "illegible, [yet] legible to the reader of trees".

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that "images" must be "destroyed" by a sort of mystical "burning" if one is to experience Being, combusting its very nature.

As fascinating as these poetic arabesques can be, some passages prove to be rough reading. "When the terrible question is / Stopped over us", the death-obsessed poet writes in *Fragments* (1978). The finger . . . // Will designate the director of no- / direction / of no-face with / The mirror of no-mirror . . . . And the punning can be dubious. When Stétié invokes the "viduë du vide", does he mean the "widowhood" - the correct, etymological, sense - or the "voidness" of the void?

Alas, Michael Bishop's version comprises errors, ranging from word-choices ("bleuets" translated into Canadian English as "blueberries"; "l'iseron rendered pedantically as "convolvulus") to an overall translation philosophy that sometimes turns, word for word, skewed yet comprehensible, indeed incantatory, French into quite weird English. When Stétié, inverting subject and verb, writes "Sera l'amour dans le noir du fils", Bishop renders this clumsily as "Will be love in the mirror of the son". The subtleties of definite or indefinite

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