

## **Ammiel Alcalay and the Limits of Translation**

An essayist, editor, translator, poet, and scholar, **Ammiel Alcalay** is the author of *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*, the *cairo notebooks*, *from the warring factions*, and *Memories of Our Future: Selected Essays, 1982-1997*. He has edited and translated the anthologies *Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing* and *For/Za Sarajevo: A Tribute to Bosnia*, in addition to translating *The Tenth Circle of Hell*, by Rezak Hukanovic; *Portraits of Sarajevo* and *Sarajevo: A War Journal*, by Zlatko Dizdarevic; and *Nine Alexandrias* and *Sarajevo Blues*, by Semezdin Mehmedinovic. Ammiel Alcalay teaches at Queens College, CUNY and the CUNY Graduate Center. -Ramsey Scott

**Loggerhead Reading Series:** I wanted to begin with a question about geography and your personal development as a poet, writer, translator, and (dare I say it) intellectual. I'm particularly interested in your connections to the following areas, and to ideas, languages, and cultural ties you associate with them: New England, the former Yugoslavia, and Israel/Palestine. What is your connection to each of these regions? How have the cultural legacies you've been left with from each of these places influenced your work and thought?

**Ammiel Alcalay:** To paraphrase the Grateful Dead, or Robert Hunter more precisely, "what a long strange trip it's been." These things seem to change fairly significantly in different phases of one's life. In my case, for at least the past five years or so I've been feeling more and more tied to the New England part of myself (even though I live in Brooklyn) but getting back to that has been quite circuitous. Growing up "first generation," with parents and extended family speaking a whole bunch of different languages and acting differently (yelling out your name in the supermarket, for instance), does mark you in a way. On the other hand, the more I think back to the kids I grew up with, middle-class and working class, the more I realize how many of them were in similar situations - Italian, Greek, Chinese - there just wasn't any official definition or discourse around it so we weren't encouraged to "share" in that patronizing but sometimes useful way kids are these days. But Boston, Gloucester (where we went for part of the summer and counted amongst family friends **Charles Olson** and Vincent Ferrini), and later Cape Cod (where I lived for several years working in trucking and automotive stuff), did leave some very indelible marks on my sense of place, landscape, light, speech patterns - the textures of

everything deeply familiar. Not to mention the **Red Sox**, which could be the subject of a whole other interview.

This is not to say that the 8 years I spent in Jerusalem didn't also etch some fairly indelible materials into me but I would concur with Charles Olson's great line that "people don't change, they only stand more revealed." As far as ex-Yugoslavia is concerned, since my parents came from there as refugee/immigrants, they preserved a kind of "frozen" sense of the place, circa late 1930s, up till 1941. Although I never lived there, it was deceptively familiar on many long visits. If I hadn't had these extended and deep experiences and encounters with other places, I don't think my work would have developed the way it has - in other words, I don't think I would have felt the need to engage in all these different aspects or facets: the work that went into *After Jews & Arabs* or *Keys to the Garden*; my work as a translator of Bosnian texts, my political and cultural engagement on the question of Palestine; the materials that went into *the cairo notebooks* and *from the warring factions*, and so forth. I learned a tremendous amount by being in other places, by involving myself in other languages and ways of being public as a writer that, when contrasted to some of my contemporaries that haven't had such experiences, does distinguish my approach in sometimes quite dramatic ways.

For instance, the experience of being politically involved while living in Jerusalem before and during the first intifada, is quite irreplaceable because it really was a popular revolution, despite the fact that it was suppressed and then politically co-opted. There was something incredibly exhilarating and expansive in that. But what I discovered, as someone who was politically active in high school during the crucial years of the late 60s and early 70s, is that I was encountering ways of thinking, acting and being that were, in many ways, already familiar to me.

So there has been this constant negotiation and renegotiation between places and times and activities - to this I would add that, as far back as I can remember, I've always had this knack of gravitating towards things and people that are very local, or genuine, or of a place, whether it be a bookstore, a garage, or a corner with people hanging out like when I managed a laundromat in the West Village in the mid 1970s and there was a contingent of retired longshoremen out talking every morning and every afternoon. When I was a kid there was a wonderful guy named Mr. Chase who would paint our house. He also worked on the **Boston & Maine**, I can't remember whether as a brakeman or an engineer, but I do remember that I would fake any

and every possible kind of illness so I could stay home from school and hang around with Mr. Chase, carrying his bucket of spackle, watching him work the walls and listening to him tell stories.

When I was in Jerusalem the first time, in the late 70s, I worked as a kind of general gofer and assistant at this very old organization called the Council of the Sephardic Communities - most of the people there were old Jerusalemites, from families that were there for hundreds of years, and just by hanging around I learned and intuited a tremendous amount, things that led me to understand what I found and didn't find in books. During the intifada, we had a close friend who was a Mennonite and she ran the Mennonite Center there which became a kind of clearing house for all kinds of people that later went on to become both famous and infamous. Just by spending time there and listening, engaging with various people, I was able to gain the kind of nuanced understanding of things that is just unavailable otherwise.

This has always characterized my approach, for instance, to the literary world - I'd much rather work with a small press and get deeply involved in the whole endeavor at a very modest level than strive and hob knob with big name type people. That just doesn't interest me because there is little or no exchange involved - those kinds of people are just moving ahead, with little or no concern for anything common or collective. That too, I feel more and more strongly, is part of an intellectual ethics, a way of putting into practice various power relationships and breaking some of them down rather than falling into them and simply accepting what's given. Everything also changes as the context changes - I put a tremendous amount of effort into translation and enabling access to various literatures and traditions but as that gets taken up in a more organized way by others I find it less urgent and have shifted my energies elsewhere.

Things always work at cross-purposes: as I worked to make things accessible, the accompanying risk is that some of those things would just become commodified. In our post-NAFTA world, I'm coming more and more to feel that now Americans feel they have a right to literatures from other parts of the world, much like they have a right to Chilean cherries in New York in the middle of January, Argentinian wine, or an endless flow of products made somewhere else. At such a point, I think it may be wise to NOT translate certain things because we are then only reproducing the process of getting something at no cost, of occluding the labor involved and the price one pays for that kind of knowledge. If you have to learn a language and immerse yourself in another culture to the point that you can begin discerning

things about it, there is a significant cost and a significant renunciation of one's own powers in American English, as an inhabitant of the empire. Interestingly enough, after this whole circuitous journey, up till now at least, I've come back to thinking about this continent and its writers in a way that may be closer to the kinds of intuitions I had when I was much younger, almost as if I had to undertake these journeys and involvements just to verify those intuitions.

**LRS:** What are your intuitions regarding this continent and its writers? Whose work have you found yourself gravitating or re-gravitating toward?

**Alcalay:** Well, the experience of playing badminton with the 6 ft. 7 in. Charles Olson in the back yard as a 5 year old is kind of indelible. I was lucky enough to grow up having all those small press books and little magazines around the house - *Black Mountain Review*, *Evergreen*, *Big Table*, *Yugen*, etc. - and when I started exploring, these are the things that I encountered. So Kerouac, Burroughs, Olson, Creeley, **Robert Duncan**, Douglas Woolf, **Denise Levertov**, Diane di Prima, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka - these were all familiar names. When I started writing poetry as a teenager, I sent it to Vincent Ferrini and had a great correspondence that has lasted until now, as Vincent recently turned 92! Vincent, of course, is the person to whom the *Maximus Poems* are addressed and, although he sometimes gets a bad rap by people who haven't read deeply in Olson because of the one famous poem in which Olson takes him to task for certain things, the fact is that Vincent is that rare poet who spans the pre-cold war political poets of the 30s and all the post-1945 trends, from the Beats to **Black Mountain**, San Francisco Renaissance, New York School, and all the other inadequate labels that only get us to a section of the shelf without really letting us see the extent of the whole library.

For many years I found myself questioning this "Americanness" as against some other sense of history or collectivity that I centered around the Mediterranean and that I explored deeply but, in coming back more strongly to myself as a poet rooted in this language, I have come to see these writers with ever more resonant layers from which I feel there is always more to learn. Moreover, because of the ways in which I familiarized myself with layers of the Mediterranean, I've come to see these poets as just one recent manifestation of the incredibly complex history of this continent. These are concerns that I'm actively engaged in now - my current project is an attempt to write something akin to *After Jews & Arabs* but about North America; an in-depth

geographical, cultural, intellectual mapping going back to its earliest inhabitants, through the settlers to our present condition, all the while using the poets as a filter for ways we might apprehend or lay knowledge out.

**LRS:** Going back to what you said earlier, I think the importance of NOT translating certain things is essential. On the other hand, I'm interested in your own approach to translating, given the range of materials you've dealt with, from testimonials of torture victims to poetry. How do you adapt your approach or methodology to these very different forms?

**Alcalay:** I think there's a lot of mystification in translation. For me, an essential element has to do with the choice of the materials and figuring out ways to somehow insulate or attempt to insulate the fate of the text. In other words, can you figure out ways to build in some of the resistances that the text might have presented to its readers in the original in its new context. The conditions will vary wildly - for example, I'm just finishing a project that I embarked upon as a group effort with some younger Arabic scholars and translators. We've translated a book of poems by a Syrian poet, also a former political prisoner, whose name is **Faraj Bayraqdar**. Now the language of these poems is exceedingly hard to transmit into American English because it can easily sound, at times, banal - when the poet is referring to a bird, for instance, he is at the fence of the prison, thinking about his wife and daughter, in conditions in which he hasn't had paper or a proper place to sleep for a very long time and has undergone unspeakable physical torture. The poems were sometimes written with twigs using old tea on cigarette papers, that kind of thing. So you somehow have to transfer the use of a repertoire of fairly standard metaphors from classical to modern Arabic poetry that are sometimes being employed by this poet in a conventional manner and sometimes in a dramatic manner.

One way to build in a certain readership, or a certain consciousness of the readership for a text like this is to think very hard about where such a thing should be published, what context it will appear in. Once it appears in a certain context it can provide new ways of reading other things that have appeared in that context. I would say that we managed to pull this off with the work of Semezdin Mehmedinovic, by publishing with **City Lights**. His work spoke to other works people might expect from a press like City Lights and created new and different resonances with those texts. It's very interesting how these things work - by publishing with smaller presses, I think I've made

some of these texts matter at a point closer to production; that is, the kind of writers I identify with have gone to these sources. Had the books appeared more commercially, they would enter into the discourse at a stage further from the initial production of innovative writers and have much less of an effect, become easily consumed and so on. A perfect example of this is that the books I've translated with smaller presses remain in print while important books, like the first account of someone from a Serb camp, *The Tenth Circle of Hell* by the Bosnian poet Rezak Hukanovic, published by a major press with prominent reviews, is out of print. In other words, it had some immediate effect, got a nano-second of air time, and disappeared, while the other stuff has remained, and been influential in deeper ways.

This idea of NOT translating has become increasingly important to me. As I said before, now that we've entered a kind of post-NAFTA world, along with the post 9/11 idea that it might not be a bad thing to be informed about other parts of the world, all kinds of people are ready to step in as speculators, in some sense panning for the gold of some unknown potential Nobel Prize winner by suddenly becoming interested in all kinds of previously obscure literatures. I think of **Thoreau's** wonderful line that goes something to the effect of, if a man comes to your door trying to help, turn around and run. While there are a lot of good intentions out there now and some very valuable work being done, I remain deeply skeptical and suspicious about how translation continues to be done in this country. We get solitary literary works, removed from any context, and often this only helps to buttress and reconstitute the privileged ideas of art and the literary artifact in our own tradition, removing texts from social, political, economic, historical and spiritual contexts. So we get the one or several great novels of a writer or the book of selected poems without the letters, biographies, literary histories, politics, gossip, and everything else that embeds a text in a particular time and place.

This allows for a kind of money laundering, in which people deeply discredited in their own countries can come to us, the uninformed, and seek full rehabilitation through translation and adulation by our own mediocre and insular intellects who use these works as opportunities to display their own apparent courage and social consciousness. This ranges from the farcical to the truly demonic - there will be no shortage of Baathist writers lauded by gullible westerners who don't know the simplest facts about Iraqi repression or literary history and will simply take those seeking rehabilitation at their word. The general racism of many popular Ashkenazi Jewish Israeli writers towards Arabs

and Arab Jews, something that is common knowledge amongst the victims of that racism in Israel, rarely gets dealt with here, so huge reputations are built on completely false premises. You can find these kinds of examples in almost any culture, once you get to know it well enough. Since we have no real venues for the kind of deeper public debate such cases would entail, these things usually pass unnoticed.

**LRS:** These questions of production points and contexts seem very much related to "intellectual ethics," as you put it in your first response. Can you name some Middle Eastern poets Americans should be reading, and suggest a way of reading that won't result in some kind of pure consumption, divorced from context?

**Alcalay:** This is a tough question because we really only have the barest minimum available in translation. Having said that, if one digs a little further, some things can be found. The poet and translator **Khaled Mattawa** has done some excellent work in translating the Iraqi poets Saadi Yousef and Fadhil Azzawi. Many works by the great Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish are available, particularly his prose masterpiece ***Memory for Forgetfulness***, in Ibrahim Muhawi's extraordinary translation and presentation. There is an excellent Penguin book of Modern Arabic poetry translated by Abdullah al-Udhari that gives a very good overview; unfortunately, it's out of print but can be found in a good on-line search. A recent bilingual edition of the great poet Adonis, translated by Shawkat Toorawa, presents a kind of model of how such things should be done. We have our own treasure, **Etel Adnan**, an Arab poet who happens to write in American English. Some Arab poets, like Abdellatif Laabi, have written in French, and his work is available through City Lights in a book called ***The World's Embrace*** for which I wrote an introduction. In the UK, there is a superb journal called ***Banipal*** that only publishes contemporary Arabic literature in translation. It is the best place to get a wider sense of what is going on, to read younger, lesser known writers. Having said all of this, we are still very far from really getting into a deeper sense of what is going on.

I was just involved in a very small project with a friend, Khaled Furani, someone who just finished a fascinating doctoral thesis that is, in essence, an ethnography of Palestinian poets. In this project, our task was to choose a handful of post-Oslo Palestinian Arabic and Israeli Hebrew poems for a new book edited by Joel Beinin and Rebecca Stein that Verso is going to publish. In going over the Palestinian texts with Khaled, I was struck by the very different generational and experiential materials emerging from this group of younger poets that

were born into and grew up with the occupation. While their language derived from many of the contemporary masters like Adonis and Darwish, their poetic decisions were very related to the claustrophobic conditions of their lives, with none of them having the recourse of an independent life in Beirut, Cairo or one of the European capitals as has been the case with so many major Arab poets.

In terms of figuring out how to read these poets, context is everything: all I can suggest is immersing oneself in whatever aspects of the culture and history one is interested in - a lot of exploration is needed and with a little bit of work and a decent library you can begin to find out of print anthologies, special issues of journals, interviews, critical articles in both scholarly and non-scholarly publications. Once a certain amount of material is amassed, you can begin to start making more sense out of it, as you hear names repeated, movements referred to, historical dates cited, and so on. The stuff will not come to you, though; it really does require an active effort.

On another note, the work of Middle Eastern Jewish writers remains, in many ways, more obscure and harder to get at than many contemporary Arab writers - this is because the Middle Eastern Jewish writers are fighting marginalization and racism within Israeli culture and then the dominant Ashkenazi imagery and power structures that operate globally.

I published an anthology called *Keys to the Garden*, featuring writers born in Morocco, Iraq, Turkey, India, Yemen, Egypt, Algeria, Israel, and other places, with the hope that some of these writers might get "discovered" and get their books published in translation - out of 24 writers in the anthology, I think only three have managed to break out of this very constrained space they've been relegated to. One of them, Shimon Ballas, a superb novelist now in his 70s and originally from Baghdad, will have a novel coming out from City Lights next year that I am translating with the Israeli writer Oz Shelach. Oz is an interesting case in that he switched to writing in English; his first book, ***Picnic Grounds***, is a brilliant demonstration of how a double alienation in language sometimes allows new things to be revealed; feeling, in some sense, that he had to "get out" of Hebrew in order to interrogate the constituent and inherited ideological elements of the language, Oz explores the sites of childhood picnics in parks built over the ruins of destroyed Palestinian villages. Shimon Ballas, on the other hand, switched from Arabic to Hebrew, but his use of Hebrew is one that tries to shed the ideological baggage and apparatus within the language itself, bringing it syntactically closer to Arabic. Shimon was



recently featured in a fascinating documentary film by a Swiss Iraqi filmmaker whose name is Samir - the film, *Forget Baghdad*, features other Iraqi Jewish writers who were involved in leftist politics in Iraq, most significantly Samir Naqqash, a genius who unfortunately died last summer. Samir Naqqash was the last significant Jewish writer to continue writing in Arabic and his work is featured in *Keys to the Garden* along with an interview that I did with him in the 1990s.

**LRS:** One difference between the writers that you mention and contemporary poets in the United States is, in my view at least, the question of what constitutes the political. Are Americans misguided in distinguishing between "political poetry" and other forms? Are they misreading poets like Darwish when they read him as a writer whose primary interests or themes are political ones? In other countries and for writers living under duress, it seems as though such distinctions might not exist.

**Alcalay:** Absolutely, I think you are absolutely right in how you phrase this. The difference, I think, is that here there is the illusion that "politics don't matter" to certain segments of the population, that some people have the luxury to pretend politics don't exist, the world is ordered simply as it is, generally to their advantage. This serves as an excellent class barrier, making it very clear who belongs where, what lines of legitimacy will be drawn and so on and so forth. I was somewhat flabbergasted to see in this week's *New York Times Sunday Magazine* a story about a young novelist who got a \$500,000 advance for his first novel and a \$1 million advance for his second. I even know the literary agent in question. Now when phenomena like this exist, there must be a reason behind it, and there must be - whether conscious or not - a complex set of social, political and economic mechanisms at work. Being much more used to great writers who have generally been on the brink of poverty, something I would never romanticize, I have to see the current overpayment of a select group of writers as a kind of attempt to glut the market and create a kind of useless commodity out of writing - something apparently necessary but, like a VCR that programs 2 years in advance, actually useless.

The kind of writing I'm more used to is, first and foremost, a necessity for the writer - as such, it can become a necessity for its readers. The audience for this kind of writing tends to be smaller in number. Again, I would never promote an elitist view either. I have no problem with writers working for large audiences. I think someone like Stephen King is actually a terrific writer, and a necessary one, who I know has a more conscious and active politics towards writing than many of the

more elitist types who might identify a Stephen King as the problem, something I once had a dispute with Susan Sontag about. In terms of writers from other places, obviously we read them reductively by only focusing on the political conditions out of which they write. For someone like Darwish, this has been a central problem that a lot of his writing from the past 20 years addresses directly.

**LRS:** I'd like to get back to some individuals and experiences you mentioned in your first response as indirect influences on your writing and your sense of place: Mr. Chase, the longshoremen at the laundromat, the head of the Mennonite Center in Jerusalem. What is the difference between locating inspiration in these people and the experiences that surround them, as opposed to, say, citing your first encounter with a W.C. Williams poem?

**Alcalay:** I don't really see a difference. My experience of encountering *Spring & All* is as real to me as anything, sometimes more so. The same goes for everything I remember reading in a formative sense, whether it was Jack London, Jack Kerouac, Kenneth Patchen, **Emily Dickinson**, or Sappho. Like music you hear, places you see, or people you meet and become attached to or learn something from, these early reading experiences are crucial. While I have stressed the experiential, I think reading is an encounter that can be life changing, consciousness changing, absolutely necessary for sustenance. Robert Duncan at some point is speaking about a critic who relies on taste, and I'm going to paraphrase this from Jed Rasula's ***The American Poetry Wax Museum***, one of the truly essential literary histories we have of post World War II American poetry: "Since he has no other conceivable route to knowledge of that work, taste must suffice. But I can have no recourse to taste," Duncan says, adding that the work of Olson, Levertov and others "belongs not to my appreciations but to my immediate concerns in living." The key, I think, is not to make the separation - books are part of the world, while un-branded, unexpected, non-commodified experience is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Ironically, books and poems may still serve as some of the surest pathways back into experience, and back into the values of experience. ❖