

Afzal Ahmed Syed's *Rococo and Other Worlds*,
Selected Poems

Reviewed by Taffy Martin

Afzal Ahmed Syed. *Rococo and Other Worlds, Selected Poems*. translated from Urdu by Musharraf Ali Farooqi. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8195 6933-2.

Afzal Ahmed Syed's handsome collection, *Rococo and Other Worlds, Selected Poems* is a delight to hold, to peruse and to read. It is also an invitation to wander amongst poems and prose whose principal ingredient, in the face of psychic violence and political oppression, is amused but carefully targeted irony. The volume consists of selections from three earlier works, *Rococo and Other Worlds* (2000), *Death Sentence in Two Languages* (1990) and *An Arrogated Past* (1984). Highly allusive to contemporary Pakistani culture, to everyday events whether political or routine and to the world outside of Syed's native Pakistan, the poems are challenging to read.

The selections from Syed's earliest work, *An Arrogated Past*, appear last in the present volume and consist entirely of poetry. The stanzas and the lines are short, as elsewhere, but the longest poems appear here. Much has been made of the first stanza of the opening poem: "The Moroccans invented the papyrus / the Phoenicians, the alphabet / I invented Poetry." This provocative claim proves, though, to be more than mere posturing. The poem progresses with relentless speed and apparent hilarity through a series of "inventions," each more ominous than the other until, in a final two-line stanza, the speaker admits his about face: "I bartered the whole of poetry for fire / and burnt the Tyrant's hand". The surprise here is not simply the lack of a closing period, but the fact that the "Tyrant" whose hand the speaker has chosen to burn had been, until these closing lines, absent from the poem. The fable is thus not only a reversal of Faustian greed but the taunt of a speaker posturing as madman in response to an invisible threat. Clay mines, body parts, rivers, seas, silkworms, bridges, zoos, merchant ships, courtyards and courthouses are all part of the décor to which the speaker bears witness in an attempt to decipher but not reverse the commerce of a world devoid of sense. In the penultimate poem it is as a dog, one who "has swallowed its chain," that the speaker comes to terms with the

daemons without and, in a surprisingly lyric turn, with the daemons within. The solution, we learn, is to revert to the “script” locked in the heart “like the secret / at which I had first learned / to bark”.

As if in response to the disjointed phantoms of early work, *Death Sentence in Two Languages*, the longest of the three sections of this collection, opens with poems which address an unidentified you. The selection includes prose pieces whose taut simplicity holds absurdity at bay and poems whose implacable precision intensify rather than nullify the horrors they portray. In the poem “To Live Is a Mechanistic Torture,” “the bones of children [which] flex / Like a tree’s green bough,” might have evoked winsome vulnerability had the image not followed upon one of “girls who commit suicide / cutting open their vaginas / [leaving] no farewell note.” The response, not unlike that of the dog who swallowed its chain and reverted to the chain locked in his heart, augurs forbearance: “The poison administered us / shall not be expelled from our body through tears.” Incomprehension informed by utmost respect define the vision of the observer in the prose pieces whose speaker repeatedly effaces himself. He is, as he says, “the weed which grows outside the stable; a tablet with plaintive letters, the loneliest fish in the net...” As if in attempt to comprehend his existence, the speaker repeatedly revisits his birth and the reactions of neighbors to his arrival. He imagines, as well, his death, or rather the moment when death comes calling. Faced at that moment with “the foetus of the poem I could not write,” the speaker seems little inclined to refuse death’s invitation since “now I have nothing to give her.” Death and birth, fertility and sterility as well as fishnets, blood-stained sheets and a “flower bearing five wounds” make of these poems mysteries to be savored rather than resolved. The speaker invents not poetry but the art of survival.

The most recent poems, those drawn from Syed’s 1990 *Rococo and Other Worlds*, open this collection and display once again the constantly accelerating rhythms of the earlier poems. They also display the same amused irony in the face of pervasive terror and oppression. The allusiveness of the texts intensifies as does the surrealist quality of the images while prose and poetry continue to alternate with simplicity of expression. The new element here, in the midst of poems that are more politically open, is love poems, love poems which stylistically are recognizably Syed’s. “Tell Me a Story” thus employs the escalating rhythms of “I Invented Poetry,” but its speaker is a dejected lover whose feverish jealousy pushes him to frenzy and finally a poignant albeit self deprecating anticlimax: “Tell me a story [...] other than that it was not raining that day”. Just as the details of this deception remain unknown, so nearly all of the poems of *Rococo and Other Worlds* carry their share of mystery. In a diabolical political fable, Eva Peron’s casket seems to have been abandoned because of a corroded hairpin. In another of these quirky poems,

the only respite from the pomp and circumstance of political despots and the arrival of “ranger trucks and the armored personnel carriers” is the “language of strawberry and vanilla” employed in a campaign to conquer the people. Once again the last stanza ridicules pretense: “Their campaign / to introduce an ice-cream / was the last pleasant surprise for our city.”

Afzal Ahmed Syed is remarkable for the clarity of his vision, for the manic posturing of his speaker, for his polysemy, his sensuality and surreal images and for his clairvoyant attacks on pretension, neglect and injustice. One hopes that this handsome edition will bring him deserved attention from English-language readers. How, though, will this be accomplished when he appears in the Library of Congress catalogue and those of countless other libraries as Afzal Ahmad Sayyid? How, further, is the English-language reader to appreciate the generous praise for his imaginative use of nazm poetry and the ghazal when he does not understand Urdu? Reading Syed is also frustrating because it is impossible for a reader unfamiliar with Urdu to appreciate the contribution of his translator, Musharraf Ali Farooqi, to the success of the volume. One imagines that the skillful alternation between restraint and excess are faithful interpretations of the original texts, as must be that between utter simplicity and decorative excess.

Despite these frustrations, one is grateful that a translation of Afzal Ahmed Syed now exists. Throughout this volume one senses not only a politically committed poet-speaker but also a poet concerned with the fate of poetry. In “The Dirge of a Rabid Dog,” the final poem of *An Arrogated Past* and so of the volume of selected poems, the speaker assumes the posture of a journeyman and recalls his various incarnations, as laborer, gentleman, teacher or sexton, only to conclude with what might well be a parable of poet as pariah: “In the capacity of a poet / I wrote the dirge of a rabid dog / As a gentleman I recited it and died”. This same concern with the fate of the poet and his ignoble demise reappears in the poem and in the prose piece that conclude the selections from *Rococo and Other Worlds*. The speaker turns his attention from his own disquiet to the fate of his ancestors, first Virgil, thwarted in his attempt to have the manuscript of the Aeneid destroyed, then Aphra Behn whose contemporaries concluded ironically that she had “earned her living, principally, from selling her flesh.” Ironic fate indeed.

In all of these poems, the voice of Afzal Ahmed Syed, be it fatalist or outraged, joyous or nostalgic, surreal, provocative or contemplative is a steadfast reminder that poetry, both lyric and political, is alive and well.