

## *Cantata for a Dead Bird*

A Novel in French by Claire Gebeyli  
(Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996)  
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Claire Gebeyli's first novel in French, *Cantate pour l'Oiseau Mort*, has just been published in Paris. Familiar with Gebeyli's poetry and journalistic writing for several decades, I approached her novel with great curiosity. Could one write such a thick work (nearly 300 pages), I wondered, when one is essentially a poet? My initial curiosity quickly became great expectation as I read *Cantata*. If arousing expectation and fulfilling it is the sign of a good novel (as E.M. Forster claimed), *Cantata* certainly meets the criteria.

I read the novel in one sitting, carried through the 49 chapters as though through a piece of haunting music (as the title suggests). The two parts of the book converge towards the ultimate tragic images of three victims: a giant stork shot down by callous people; a distorted, ageless and sexless human being named Victor/Loulou; and a beautiful young woman, Lea, who has preserved, in her vibrant soul, the aborted promise of a fresh dawn. Both Lea and Victor/Loulou, however, are killed by the bombs which fall upon Beirut and its citizens during the Lebanese war (1975-1990). Their deaths are presented as emblems of a savage and useless war.

A new departure ends the novel and ties together the conclusion and the opening, as in a great piece of music featuring a subtle pattern of a recurring *leit-motif*. The introduction begins as follows (reviewer's translation): "The time has come to pull together, stitch by stitch, what remains in the memory, to mend the woven fabric of a tapestry whose threads stretch so far back into the past." Then the narrator wonders: "Why should one care about roots? Isn't life the best of all promises? Why should one tie it down to a piece of land?...And yet, not willing it nor under-

standing its reasons, memory has imposed its laws. Images recur infinitely, recounting, inch by inch, the flow of time and the succession of generations of people....Images bring up to the surface a chorus of voices deeply buried in the earth."

And thus the chorus of voices, the *Cantata*, begins to be heard.

Out of this vast opening, a one-hundred year saga unfolds, covering the lives of generations of families from East and West, meeting first in Alexandria and later in Beirut, during the golden periods of both cities. Greeks, Italians, Arabs and Jews mix, mingle and perform their interrelated dramas before scattering apart again and striking fresh roots in new, far-flung corners of the world.

Gebeyli brilliantly presents an epic tale of continual migrations. She captures the essence of life and death, of wars and revolutions, of the history of great cities housing a rich mixture of people, cultures and ideas, yet fatally breaking down under the weight of political and socio-economic pressures. With great subtlety and grace, the narrator allows the reader to gradually decipher a vision of life and death, of being rooted and uprooted, in this turbulent part of the world. To be born on the shores of the azure Mediterranean, to grow, love, suffer and migrate, define the human condition. The last paragraph of the novel carries Lea's parents by boat to her brothers who have newly established themselves in Australia. This old couple, however, have lived the best years of their lives in Alexandria and Beirut; they sail away from the Mediterranean's shores more dead than alive.

Gebeyli's tale weaves, "stitch by stitch", the great tapestry whose threads stretch so far back into our collective Mediterranean past. Questions of great import loom large over the characters and plot of Gebeyli's fine novel: Isn't the land, any land, God's gift to mankind? Is mankind fatally condemned to conflicts and exile, starting with Cain and Abel's mythic confrontation and ending with war-damaged Beirut?

With great humility, Gebeyli disappears behind her narrator. She does not attempt to give answers to the many questions that the novel implicitly poses. Instead, she trusts the sensibilities of her readers to fill in the blank spaces, stitch by exquisite stitch.