

Edna Kahla, a poet of loneliness and nostalgia

In *Anthology of Lebanese Authors in the English Language*, (1) compiled in 1948 by Munah Racy and Rushdi Maalouf, Edna Kahla (Mrs. Khabbaz) is said to be an English-born poet of Lebanese origin, who published a collection of poems that were well received by the British public. This brief introduction is followed by a few examples of her poems. Nothing is said about the year of her birth, the date of publication of her poems, the year of her death and the kind of work she performed besides writing poetry. The photocopy of her poems, sent to us by a friend visiting England, makes the same mistake of neglecting dates. A careful reading of the poems gives us, however, a certain information about the author. She must have lived in the early quarter of this century, when Lebanese emigrants referred to Lebanon as Syria, i.e. before the proclamation of Lebanese independence in 1925. She seems to be a lover of beauty, nature, music, children, all the idols of the Romanticists. She travelled a lot because her poems tell about her visits to Lebanon ("Aley", "Syria" pp. 7 & 8), Italy (The Appian Way p. 19-20), France (p. 16, 17-18, 62) and her longing to return to her birthplace, England, whose "loved simplicity" she preferred to the "gilded city" of Paris, where she lived as an exile (p. 17-18 "From Exile", p. 62 "Banishment").

A good many of her poems relate sad, personal experiences: "Loneliness" p. 25, "Nightmare" p. 5, "Hunger" p. 63, "After Denial" p. 45, "Diffidence" p. 10, "Poet's Calvary" p. 32, "Menace of Dreams" p. 14. They tell about a soul in pain seeking refuge in poetry and in prayer. Some of her poems express nostalgia and longing to the dreamland of childhood: "The Return" p. 59, solitude and estrangement "The Estranged" p. 2. They all carry a note of romantic emotionality and charm.

In musical performances, the poet detects sadness and agony, ("Agony of Music" p. 44). Music reveals to her betrayal "When sorrowful lips are dumb"; despair "for the days that never come"; "remorse for the bitter sins of pride", and "in the song most passionate, the cry of the Crucified." The moon of Lebanon sheds on Aley her wan, white wistfulness amidst a poignant, sad music (Music-Aley, p. 8). In Debussy's music, she is attracted by the romantic, pale-haired girl (Fille aux cheveux de lin, p.15), who, slight and still, sits idle at the sill, whose still lips can only murmur half-intended words.

Most of the topics treated in the collection are those of the Romantic 19th century poets: nature, travel, religious themes, medieval tales, children, dreams, ruins, scenery, trees and flowers are tenderly described or evoked in her poems about places seen or visited: "English May" (p. 14), "In Syria" (p. 7) "Sea's Edge" (p. 26), "Thrift" (p. 34), "Unforgotten Spring" (p. 36). Throughout a

wayward wandering, having trod "the battered grass with heavy and with heedless feet", she suddenly feels sad and tremulous because she has hurt the gentle moss. Then, with great dismay, she stoops to gather the gentle objects and heal their wounds (Earth-Wounds, p. 9).

Her religious poems resemble humns of mystic love addressed to "The Madonna of the Shrine" (p. 21), whose eyes are "blue as the pools of heaven" and "her raiment white as chastity"; of penitent adoration to "Christ of Sorrows" (p. 37), to whom her prayer says: "If I might see thee only once, I think I could not sin again."

Her poems on children recall Shelley's and Blake's idea that their innocence and their dreams are remnants of remembered Paradise (p. 11-13). Children are the brothers of angels, their hearts silently worship while they tread the green fields. Knowing heaven, they know the eternal All, for what is Heaven but Infinity?

Evoking the medieval tale of Elaine and Launcelot (p. 58), she tries to imagine what would happen if Elaine died before her lover. From the gate of Heaven, she would look back to Earth and yearn for him. Then Elaine turns to Launcelot and asks him: If you could see me unconsoled beyond the farthest star, would your heart grow tender and bring you up the skyward path, to clamour at the gate?

Simple and personal, her experiences are clearly and simply expressed in fluent, graceful language. The verse form is semi-regular. It occasionally adopts a certain freedom in the use of irregular measure and rhyme, a form of free verse which preceded the prose poem. The following poem, "The Return", p. 59, exemplifies a successful rendering of the poet's intimate thoughts.

*We will go back to day-dreams,
And pull wild flowers again,
And gather shells at the sea's edge
And linger in the rain.*

*We will go back to nursery days
To learn forgotten art
Of trivial things most intricate
And how to pull apart
The scarlet jaws of snapdragons,
The velvet jaws of snapdragons.*

*We will turn back to yesterday
And roam the lone lanes through
Between the banks where harebells blow,
Where windy harebells blow and ring
With a still song of blue,
We will lay by this wisdom,
To pull wild flowers again,
And trail dim dreams about the streets
And linger in the rain.*

(1) Beirut, Lebanon, 1948. The poems were kindly photocopied by Miss Arminée Choukassizian.