‘THE ROOTS’ by YÜSUF AL-KHĀL

Prefatory Essay

The following is a translation of Yusuf al-Khal’s “al-Judhūr” ("The Roots") which appeared in his 1958 collection al-Bi’r al-Mahjūra (The Deserted Well) out of Dār Majallat Shīr.

Yusuf al-Khal was born in 1917 in Tripoli, Lebanon. He read literature and philosophy at the American University in Beirut and started teaching there in 1944. In 1948 he came to the United States to work for the United Nations and returned to the American University in 1955. In 1957 he founded Shīr magazine and the press Dār Majallat Shīr which published the works of poets associated with his magazine and movement, the most prominent of which were al-Khal himself and Adonis. He now runs an art gallery. In addition to al-Bi’r he has published these four collections of poetry:

al-Hurriya (Freedom), Beirut 1944
al-Ārd al-Kharāb (The Ruined Earth), Beirut 1958
Qaṣā‘īd fi’l-’Arabā‘īn (Poems in the Forties), Beirut 1960
al-A‘māl ash-Shī‘riyya al-Kāmilā 1938-1968 (Complete Poetic Works), Beirut 1973

one play (poetry):
Hirūdiyā (Herod), New York 1953

and the following translations:
Diwan ash-Shī‘r al-Amrikī (An Anthology of American Poetry), Beirut 1958
Robert Frost, Beirut 1962
an-Nābi, (The Prophet by Khalil Gibran), Beirut 1968

There are numerous articles on al-Khal but only one good one in English, Joseph Zeidan’s “Myth and Symbol in the Poetry of Adūnīs and Yūsuf al-Khāl”, Journal of Arabic Literature, X, 70-94, though some of his translations leave a little to be desired.

THE ROOTS

41 In the summertime the roots ask about their fate, and the river answers not.
Roots so glorious,¹ and yet the river answers not:

¹ Wāḥā, Wahan lahā (interj.) with li or bi to express admiration: how wonderful is (are)...!” (Wehr, 1045). This construction sounds extremely strained so I have taken some liberty in order to retain to what I believe, or sense, to be the desired meaning.
it lies choked in the mountain springs or
usurped by the clay in the noonday heat.  
Who then shall answer these roots about
their fate? Who shall embrace and protect them in the autumn time,
who shall restrain from them the harshness of winter, I wonder?

42 The leaves that whimper³ are a body
and the secret is in the roots.
And in the roots is our yesterday,
and in the roots is our tomorrow:
here the fruits are dates and oranges, and there,
grapes that the cupbearer presses into wine;
and where the locusts abound there is no fruit, just pebbles.
In vain do we scream like the winds, the hot winds
that come from their origin and just as hot depart.⁴
And we, stranger-friend, cultivate and restore the moist earth.
The soil is to us a home-womb and a shroud,
and in the earth the roots wither as they ascend,
and the earth is then a birthplace, a harvest.

Behold Nineveh!

43 The sign, screaming, took me by surprise: behold Nineveh!
I once made out in the engravings
the face of my friend. I touched it with the palm of my hand
saying: “here the echo is prolonged.
And the notion that endures is a droplet,
a droplet that the soil drinks,
that the torrents embrace, ceaseless.
What was does not become,
the owl does not screech in its dwelling
and the raven does not hover around it.
Every time is eternal,
and every journey is a return”.
And wherever I turned were etchings

² These lines actually read
the springs in the mountains choke it or
the clay usurps it in the midday heat.
I have changed these lines, as with much of this stanza, for it to flow smoothly and in
order to better duplicate the cadence and rhythm of the Arabic.
³ This verb has also the more aggressive meaning of “to growl”.
⁴ I was forced to rework this sentence to make it acceptable in English. It actually
reads:
In vain do we scream like the winds
that hot come from their place of origin and hot return