



Anabasis

Saint-John Perse , T.S. Eliot (Translator)

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This internationally famous poem by the 1960 Nobel laureate was introduced to English-language readers in this translation by T. S. Eliot. In this definitive edition, French and English texts appear on facing pages.

Preface by T. S. Eliot.

Anabasis Details

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Patyta says

ah! toutes sortes d'hommes dans leurs voies et façons : mangeurs d'insectes, de fruits d'eau ; porteurs d'emplâtres, de richesses ! l'agriculteur et l'adalingue, l'acuponcteur et le saunier ; le péager, le forgeron ; marchands de sucre, de cannelle, de coupes à boire en métal blanc et de lampes de corne ; celui qui taille un vêtement de cuir, des sandales dans le bois et des boutons en forme d'olives ; [...] ... ah ! toutes sortes d'hommes dans leurs voies et façons, et soudain ! apparu dans ses vêtements du soir et tranchant à la ronde toutes questions de préséance, le Conteur qui prend place au pied du térébinthe...

Anábasis, X, (fragmento)

Como profeta que fue rey y ahora poeta, un César que narrara no sólo sus empresas sino la historia de la humanidad entera como un canto y no en partes de guerra, Saint-John Perse nos cuenta en *Anábasis* (y en *La gloria de los reyes*, como un preámbulo a aquél) una épica moderna de vastos horizontes, un especie de viaje mayestático en honor al origen y las gestas y los andares de los hombres.

Un himno, un enigmático discurso que tiende hacia lo alto, que anhela, predice y anima a los oyentes a no cejar y enaltecerse por sus logros colectivos.

Llena de símbolos, de palabras extravagantes, cultismos, la *Anábasis* de Perse tiene siempre un tono alto, una faz grandilocuente, de elegancia con un poco de altivez, de maestro que desea y aún espera se comprenda su lección.

Pues también se oye distante, y su alta exposición de hechos tan grandes y horizonte inabarcable hacen difícil en verdad enternecerse o intimar con esta voz tan admirable, que en serio quiere miremos hacia el frente.

Muy lejos de Verlaine o Baudelaire, que miran y rebuscan hacia dentro, la poesía de Saint-John Perse más bien intenta hacer patente lo concreto, los hechos y la acción que mueve al mundo, y, mirado como cuento, consigue reavivar las energías o mostrar con quizás más optimismo el camino que nos queda.

Mon cheval arrêté sous l'arbre qui roucoule, je siffle un sifflement plus pur... Et paix à ceux, s'ils vont mourir, qui n'ont point vu ce jour. Mais de mon frère le poète on a eu de nouvelles. Il a écrit encore une chose très douce. Et quelques-uns en eurent connaissance...

Anábasis, X (fragmento)

Billy O'Callaghan says

St. John Perse won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1960. I don't know how widely he is read today, but if he's not then it's a travesty because he must rank among the most important and visionary poets of the 20th century. And this book is surely his masterpiece, a work of such scope and ambition that it stands comfortable comparison with anything produced in the field of poetry during the past 100 years.

Anabasis is an obtuse epic, a long musical poem, rich in astonishing imagery, that glistens when read aloud. It's one of those pieces that needs multiple rereads before it begins to make cohesive sense, but there is still pleasure to be had on the first run-through from the sheer beauty of the language. Eliot's translation lends its own kind of magnificence, without impinging on the splendour and mystery of Perse's spell. Furthermore, he provides an invaluable introduction and makes the poem more accessible by breaking it down to a part by part summary that lends the whole thing a very basic narrative shape:

- I. Arrival of the Conqueror at the site of the city which he is about to build.
- II. Marking out the boundary walls.
- III. Consultation of augurs.
- IV. Foundation of the city.
- V. Restlessness towards further explorations and conquests.
- VI. Schemes for foundation and conquest.
- VII. Decision to fare forth.
- VIII. March through the desert.
- IX. Arrival at the threshold of a great new country.
- X. Acclamation, festivities, repose. Yet the urge towards another departure, this time with the mariner.

In these ten parts, Anabasis presents a meditation on a journey through central Asia. But it is a story for all time, one that contemplates the world, the migrant existence and the growth of civilization, as well as making sense of man's innate cravings, for adventure, for challenge, for conquest. But even attributing these themes is to simplify this work. For me, it's analogous to Coltrane's 'A Love Supreme'. Because Anabasis is poetry (if it has to be called something); it's the perpetual astonishment that comes from stringing certain words together in certain ways, it has meaning that lives outside of definition and that you feel in a way that doesn't always make easy sense.

Matthew says

Shortly after reading this my body succumbed to an immobilizing fever. Just so you know...

HM says

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Connor Prosser says

Ok, I've just become so jaded by these nobel laureates that I'm just going to go ahead and give this 1 star. I'm fed up trying to interpret or read explanations of the poems. A poem should explain itself, rather than require an entire essay to explain what it's trying to say. Just my opinion, I'm sure some will disagree.

Eschad says

Very difficult. T.S. Eliot said to read it four times. I will give this a try and report back.

Jacobo Raucous says

Mejor en francés, para saborear la musicalidad.

Laurens says

Beeldschone taal, maar o, zo ingewikkeld.

Mana H says

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Mohammadreza says

H Lamar says

St. John Perse is one of my top five poets of the 20th century. His prose poem style incorporates a vision of the world rooted in Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Every point of seeing becomes felt both intellectually and in the spirit. *Vents* and *Anabasis* are his two essential poems. His poems are epic. In the truest of fashions I have been reading him my whole life. His books stay within arms reach. When I travel I carry the poetry of St. John Perse and the complete Death Bed edition of Walt Whitman.

St. John Perse must be read in a dual language edition. If you have studied the French language, have read Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Homer, Hegel, Jung, Thomas Wolf: our own genius of Southern writing of things felt and lived and used these as platforms for entering the seascapes and a world in four dimensions of St. John Perse then you have unlocked the expanse and elevating poetics of space, of time, of water, of conversation and conquest. To me, there is none greater than St. John Perse in modern poetry.

Patrick says

I did not know what to expect from this book, and I was surprised. Quite excellent. It does require more readings, but they are readings I'm looking forward to doing versus dreading, as if there were more to be mined from the poem. Interestingly, this book reminds me a bit of Nikos Gatsos's "Amorgos," another book-length poem that elusive in meaning but very worthy of re-reading and contemplating.

Steve says

Review to come. Maybe. Think Eliot's "Gerontion," with emphasis on the cool parts, expanded into a book

length poem. I'll try to explain later. It's early yet, but I'm pretty sure I'll re-reading this for years to come.

Stephen Cronin says

The prose poetry is very similar to that of Arthur Rimbaud, one of my favorite poets. The text is translated into English by T.S. Eliot, who's literary credibility is difficult to undermine. One of the best dollars I ever spent on a paperback.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Anabase selected poems, Saint-John Perse

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K. says

"Chanson"

"Mon cheval arrêté sous l'arbre plein de tourterelles, je siffle un sifflement si pur, qu'il n'est promesses à leurs rives que tiennent tous ces fleuves. (Feuilles vivantes au matin sont à l'image de la gloire)..."

**

Et ce n'est point qu'un homme ne soit triste, mais se levant avant le jour et se tenant avec prudence dans le commerce d'un vieil arbre, appuyé du menton à la dernière étoile, il voit au fond du ciel à jeun de grandes choses pures qui tournent au plaisir ...

**

Mon cheval arrêté sous l'arbre qui roucoule, je siffle un sifflement plus pur... Et paix à ceux, s'ils vont mourir, qui n'ont point vu ce jour. Mais de mon frère le poète on a eu des nouvelles. Il a écrit encore une chose très douce. Et quelques-uns en eurent connaissance..."

Kenneth says

For those who love a touch of mystery and disorientation, and who love to take puzzle pieces and try to arrange them into a meaningful composition--not that it lacks composition, but it maintains its' fluidity through it. I was intrigued enough by the author, and this poem in particular, to go digging for whatever I could find about his compositional techniques. After his death, it turns out, researchers were allowed access to his library/papers and discovered "cut-out" sentences and fragments from magazines, articles, encyclopedias, etc, which he then pasted together into poems. So he was fond of the surrealist technique of decoupage, and this book, *Anabasis, "Journey to the Interior"*, is a masterful example of how evocative the results of such techniques can be. Gorgeous, unexpected images and shifts in perspective, like cuts and splices in a film. Highly recommend it.

Joe says

The extreme of modernism. This book is stitched with taut images, many of which show striking beauty and a subtle warmth. However, if it had not been for the translator, T.S. Eliot, and his extremely helpful introduction, I would have had absolutely no idea what was going on. But that's why we don't just read poetry, we teach it too.

"Ha! ampler the story of the leaf shadows on our walls and the water more pure than in any dream, thanks thanks be given it for being no dream! My soul is full of deceit like the agile strong sea under the vocation of eloquence! The strong smells encompass me. And doubt is cast on the reality of things. But if a man shall cherish his sorrow - let him be brought to light! And I say, let him be slain, otherwise there will be an uprising." [37:]

"Solitude! the blue egg laid by a great sea-bird, and the bays at morning all littered with gold lemons! - Yesterday it was! The bird made off!" [45:]

"The huge earth rolls on its surface over-flowing its pale embers under the ashes - Sulphur color, honey color, color of immortal things, the whole grassy earth taking light from the straw of last winter - and from the green sponge of a lonely tree the sky draws its violet juices." [61:]

"(The shadow of a great bird falls on my face.)" [67 - the conqueror thinking about how he still has more to accomplish:]

"I have halted my horse by the tree of the doves, I whistle a note so sweet, shall the rivers break faith with their banks?" [2nd Song:]

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Christopher says

Anabase (Anabasis, the Classical Greek word for a journey up country) was the first mature work by Saint-John Perse, the poetic pseudonym of French diplomat Alexis Leger. It was written in the early 1920s during a stint in China, where Leger represented the French foreign ministry. The poet wrote mainly for himself, but after the manuscript was brought back to France by friends, *Anabase* won instant esteem, with translations into several major European languages by the end of the decade, and the facing-page rendering into English here was made by no less a major figure than T.S. Eliot.

For some weeks, Leger traveled on horseback through China's rural provinces and the Gobi Desert, which inspired this great poem of migration, ten cantos narrated by a Conqueror glorying in his victories, but driven ever onward to new lands. But in drawing inspiration from the Asian cultures around him, Perse does not refer to their peculiarities, to what sets them apart from his own, but rather he distilled from his experiences a collection of human universals. *Anabase* is a saga could be set anywhere, whether Homeric Greece, the ancient Central Asian steppes, or even the Age of Discovery. The geographical setting is unspecified but similarly universal, ranging from the shores of the sea to high elevations, from fertile soil to barren sands.

Perse's poetry is centered around a humanist outlook. It is up to Man to create meaning for his existence through great deeds. *Amers*, a later poem by Perse, includes the line "We who one day, perhaps, will die proclaim man immortal in the flaming heart of the moment", a statement that concisely captures his philosophy, which was already fully fledged in *Anabase*. There is no Providence in this plot, no hidden metaphysical reality. References to religious rites abound, but they serve merely as ethnographic colour, for the universal traits of Mankind through the ages that Perse depicts include propitiation of deities and often bloody sacrifice, even if Perse himself is a sceptical modernist.

Giving representative quotations of this work for the sake of a review is difficult, as ANABASIS is a ceaseless flow of images in prose poem form, and though the details are fine and innumerable, it is the whole overwhelming effect that makes this such a special work. But here's a bit from the introductory canto:

So I haunted the pure city of your dreams and I established in the desolate markets the pure commerce of my soul, among you / invisible and insistent as a pure fire of thorns in the gale. / Power you sang on our roads of splendour... 'In the delight of salt the mind shakes its tumult of spears... With salt I shall revive the dead mouths of desire! / Him who has not praised thirst and

drank the water of the sands from a sallet / I trust him little in the commerce of the soul...' (And the sun is unmentioned but his power is among us.

Men, creatures of dust and folks of divers devices, people of business and leisure, men from the marches and those from beyond, O men of little weight in the memory of these lands; people from the valleys and uplands and the highest slopes of this world to the ultimate reach of our shores; Seers of signs and seeds, and confessors of the western winds, followers of trails and of seasons, breakers of camp in the little dawn wind, seekers of watercourses over the wrinkled rind of the world, O seekers, O finders of reasons to be up and be gone, / you traffic not in a salt more strong than this, when at morning with omen of kingdoms and omen of deadwaters sung high over the smokes of the world, the drums of exile waken on the marches / Eternity yawning on the sands.

T.S. Eliot's translation sometimes strays from the strictest rendering of Perse's poem for the sake of dazzling English effect, but in the main it is faithful and serves well as a guide for readers who can't easily read Perse's original. This edition contains a brief but helpful preface by Eliot, as well as translations of the introductions which Larbaud, Hoffmanstahl and Ungaretti wrote for the Russian, German and Italian translations respectively. My only complaint is that this is now a print-on-demand title on lesser quality paper and the biographical details of the poet were never updated after the second edition in 1949. Still, this is a great poem, an ample work that one can curl up with and slowly get to know, and I highly recommend it.

(If your French is very good, I'd recommend getting the Perse OEUVRES COMPLETES volume in the Bibliotheque de la Pleiade series, which beyond gathering most of Perse's works in deluxe paper and binding, also contains the correspondence he wished to preserve, and among that we find discussions between Eliot and Perse on the creation of this English translation of *Anabase*).
