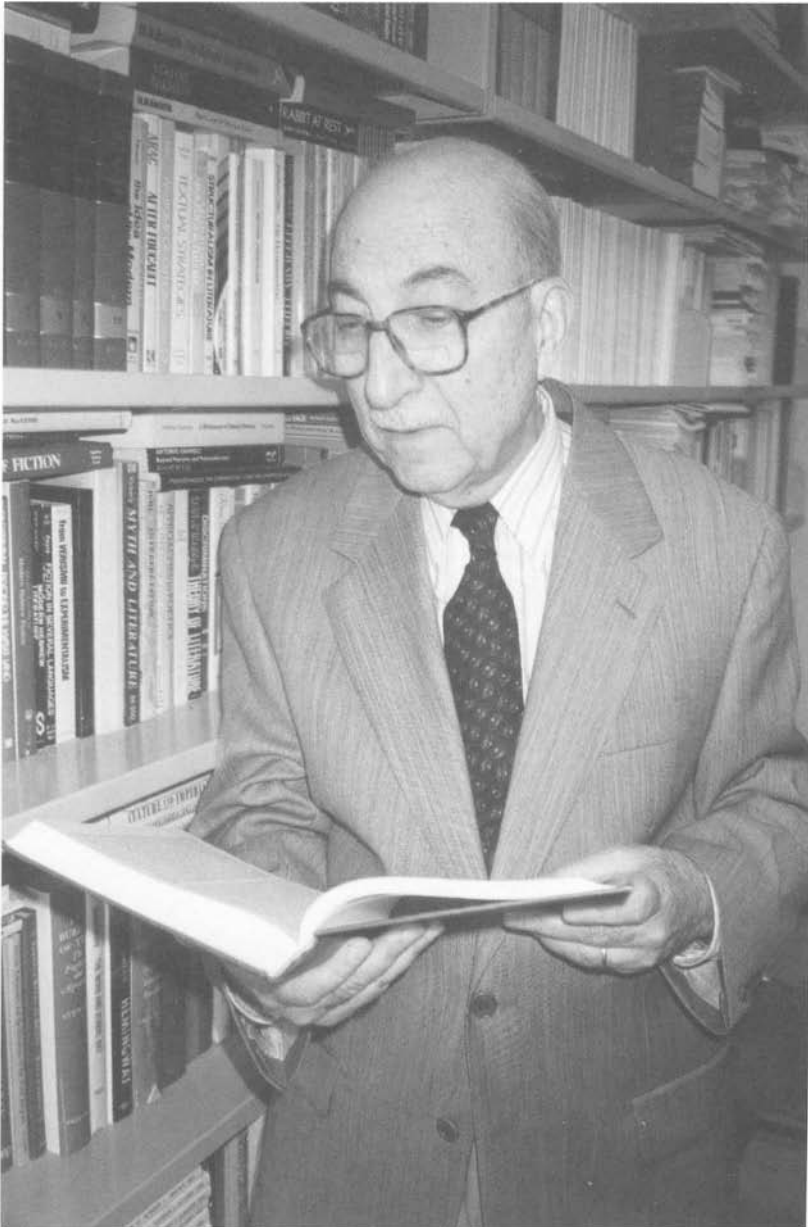


TRADITION, MODERNITY, AND POSTMODERNITY  
IN ARABIC LITERATURE



Professor Issa J. Boullata in his office at McGill University, August 25, 1999.

TRADITION, MODERNITY,  
AND POSTMODERNITY  
IN  
ARABIC LITERATURE

*Essays in Honor of Professor Issa Ḥ. Boullata*

EDITED BY

KAMAL ABDEL-MALEK & WAEL HALLAQ



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*This volume is warmly dedicated to Professor Issa J. Boullata,  
prominent educator and scholar, and is offered to him in appreciation  
by his friends, colleagues, and students.*



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## PREFACE

This collection of essays in honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata is the fruit of several years of preparation and is presented to him by a group of friends, colleagues and former students as a token of appreciation for his erudition and long service to the field of Arabic literature. As the title of the book indicates, the essays are arranged in such a way so as to reflect the development of Arabic literature from tradition to postmodernity. It is hoped that this volume will illustrate for the specialist and the general reader both the vitality and range of the modern Arabic tradition—a befitting tribute to the scholarly work and interests of Professor Boullata.

The transliteration system for Arabic words in this book follows that of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES).

A few essays in this volume have been previously published and are reproduced here by permission that was obtained by the respective contributor. Individual acknowledgment in every case is cited as an author's note. For their kind permission to allow me to translate and publish selections of their work in this volume, I am grateful to Fadwā Ṭūqān, Ḥannā Ibrāhīm, and Iman Mersal. I am also grateful to A. Skuba-Pincock for important comments on the manuscript and for technical help with the preparation of the final draft.

Finally, I owe much to my wife Diane and my children Amira and Layla for their support and affection and for having to put up with my long absences from home while working on this volume.

Kamal Abdel-Malek  
University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada  
December 8, 1999



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**Kamal Abu-Deeb** (D. Phil., Oxford, 1971) is the holder of the Chair of Arabic at the University of London. He taught at a number of Arab and Western universities including Columbia, Oxford, Berkeley, and the University of Yarmouk in Jordan. He is the author of many books and articles in the field of literary and cultural studies. He is also a poet and an essayist who contributes regularly to leading Arab periodicals. His most recent work, *Jamāliyyat al-Tajāwur aw Tashābuk al-Faḍā'āt al-Ibdā'iyya* (*The Aesthetics of Contiguity or The Interlacing of Creative Space*, Beirut, 1997). A shorter version appeared in English under the title *In Celebration of Difference* (London, 1995) examines contemporary cultural and political realities in light of an emerging “aesthetic of contiguity” that appears to be displacing the aesthetics of unity underlying modernity in western and Arab societies.

**Roger Allen** (D. Phil., Oxford, 1968) teaches Arabic language and literature at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of several studies on Arabic literature including *The Arabic Literary Heritage* (1998); *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (second edition, 1995); *Period of Time: al-Muwayliḥī's "Ḥadīth 'Īsā ibn Hishām"* (second edition, 1992); *Modern Arabic Literature* (1987), and numerous articles on modern Arabic fiction and drama as well as Arabic pedagogy.

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**Kamal Boullata** is a Palestinian-American painter and writer. Public collections containing his work include the A.H. Shoman Foundation, Amman; Institute of the Arab World, Paris; Alhambra Museum, Granada; New York Public Library, New York; and the British Museum, London. He is the author of *Istiḥdār al-Makān: Dirāsāt fī al-Fann al-Tashkīlī al-Filastīnī al-Muʿāṣir* (The Re-Presentation of Place: A Study of Contemporary Palestinian Painting). Tunis, ALECSO, 1999.

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PROFESSOR ISSA J. BOULLATA:  
A PROFILE OF AN INTELLECTUAL EXILE\*

KAMAL ABDEL-MALEK

In August of 1975, Issa Boullata was driving his car northward in upstate New York with his wife and four children. They were heading for Canada, where they had been accepted as landed immigrants and where he was to assume his position as professor of Arabic literature and language at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec.

At the Canadian border, the immigration officer examined his papers signed by the visa officer of the Canadian consulate in New York City. The officer noticed that the papers mentioned that he, Issa Boullata, was born in Jerusalem, USA and gave the country code number 461. He asked, "Where were you born?" Issa Boullata said, "In Jerusalem, Palestine." Realizing that there was an error, he crossed out USA and said he was going to write Israel instead. Issa Boullata said, "No. I was born in Jerusalem, Palestine . . . there was no Israel when I was born in 1929," then proceeded to show the officer his birth certificate, a tattered document in English, Arabic and Hebrew, the official languages of the British Mandate of Palestine. The officer looked at the document with a measure of sympathy, consulted his list of coded countries, then said, "But there is no Palestine in my list and I have no code number for it." Finally the officer realized that the problem was beyond him and handed the Boullatas their papers duly stamped. It must have been painful for them to be reminded that not only their present status as Palestinians was uncertain but also even mundane facts about their birthplace were contested. "How strange," wondered Issa Boullata in a recent article, "our conversation was on that sultry August afternoon in the Canadian immigration officer's stuffy little room, with my wife and

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\* This profile is based partly on information contained in Professor Boullata's "Jerusalem: The Archaeology of Memory," *Jusoor*, Nos. 9-10 (1998): 35-44, and on personal communication with him as well as my recollections of the years I spent at McGill University where he was my academic advisor.

children looking on silently, while Middle East politics and history impinged on a bureaucrat's simple transaction at a border point thousands of miles away from Jerusalem." (Issa Boullata, "Jerusalem: The Archaeology of Memory," *Jusoor*, Nos. 9–10 (1998): 36).

As a Palestinian, Issa Boullata's experience on the borders was not uncommon. Real and fictional Palestinian individuals are often confronted with the awesome question, "Who are you?" each time they cross borders to live as exiles in countries other than their own. "For the last half-century or so," says the Palestinian writer Fawaz Turki in his *Exile's Return* (1994), "to be Palestinian was, in part by upbringing, in part by sensibility, to be a wanderer, an exile, a touch moon-mad, always a little different from others. Our name, which we acquired after 1948, was not so much a national title—we had had no nation—as an existential term. Palestinians enjoyed the freedom to go beyond the confining thresholds of national torpor. We had the freedom to remember, to dream of a different reality, to deliver ourselves into history's keeping." Defying his "confining thresholds" and the tragic loss of a homeland, Issa Boullata forged ahead to build a life for himself and his family, albeit in exile.

Professor Issa Boullata is today a unique blend of scholar, educator, advisor, administrator, and family man. He is a prolific scholar who has penned many books, articles, and book reviews; an educator whose teaching experience has now spanned half a century; an advisor who has trained scores of graduate students; an administrator whose managerial abilities have been well attested; and a family man who, along with his wife Marita, has raised his children with devotion and love.

At McGill University, he was my graduate advisor under whose scholarly guidance I received my training in Arabic and Islamic Studies. For me, he has always been a model of a hardworking individual who has distinguished himself in the highly competitive academe and who has struck a balance between observing Arab traditions and responding to the way of life in the West.

Issa Joseph Boullata was born in Jerusalem, Palestine, on February 25, 1929. His grandfather, Issa Hanna Boullata, was a master mason who, in the late nineteenth century, built monumental edifices still standing in the old city of Jerusalem, notably the colossal school of Mar Mitri next to the Greek Orthodox convent and the shopping complex of Dabbaghah next to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. In the middle of the shopping complex is a circular waterworks con-

struction with marble basins in several tiers which, as a child, Issa used to go around to look with much pleasure at the low, glass stalls under awnings that surrounded it. These were the stalls of the Bukhara mystics of the Naqshbandi Order in Jerusalem who sold trinkets of all kinds for a living, and often sharpened knives, scissors, and axes on their spark-producing grindstones that always fascinated young Issa and his playmates. As a little boy, Issa used to buy marbles and spinning tops from them; and as an adolescent, razor blades, penknives, and other items.

Now, in the closing years of the 1990s, Jerusalem is a different place, occupied, divided, and a tense city. Not only is the fountain of Issa Boullata's grandfather silent but the stalls of the Bukhara mystics are gone, and parts of the city are forcibly occupied by aggressive Israeli settler groups.

Issa Boullata's maternal grandfather, Ibrahim Atallah—named after the Patriarch Abraham (Ibrahim in Arabic) was a goldsmith with a prosperous shop in the old city of Jerusalem. In the 1930s, when Issa Boullata was but a small boy, his maternal grandfather decided to expand and modernize his home situated in one of the new Arab suburbs of Jerusalem. He was then retired but kept all of his goldsmith's tools and equipment at home in a shack in the garden. As the foundation concrete was being poured, young Issa saw his grandfather, with tears in his eyes, throw his best steel anvil into the foundation as a treasured token contribution for good luck and for basic strength. Though the house and its inhabitants are now gone, such remarkable gesture still lives with the adult Issa Boullata as a symbol of rootedness in the soil of a lost homeland.

In the spring of 1948, Issa's maternal grandfather and his family became refugees in Bethlehem living in crowded, rented quarters, having hurriedly abandoned their home and fled in fear of the deadly fighting that broke out in Jerusalem. The grandfather is reported to have ominously said, as he arrived in Bethlehem, "The dust of my grave is calling me." He died broken-hearted several weeks later in 1948, and was taken to be buried in Jerusalem. His house was occupied by new Jewish immigrants and his future generations were deprived of their patriarch's house and legacy. He was buried in the Orthodox cemetery which, after the Arab-Israeli military hostilities of 1948, fell in the Israeli-controlled section of the new city of Jerusalem. His grave was therefore not accessible to members of his family who were living in the old city, in the West Bank, or in Jordan.

Issa's father, Joseph Boullata, worked for the Department of Post, Telegraph, and Telephones in the British Government of Palestine. Both his father and mother, Barbara Atallah, belonged to the Eastern Orthodox Church in Jerusalem and they raised young Issa and his five siblings according to the rites of their church.

In 1934, Issa started his elementary education in a government school where he studied Arabic then moved to the De La Salle College (a private Catholic school) in 1938 where he received in 1947 his secondary school certificate with distinction. His achievements as a young student had much to do with his intelligence and hard work as well as the quality of his teachers at the time, these included: Mounah Khourî, who until recently was Professor of Arabic Literature at Berkeley; Jabrā Ibrāhîm Jabrā, the renowned Palestinian writer, critic, and artist; and Niqūlā Ziyāda, who later taught history at the American University of Beirut.

Even though he was brought up at a Catholic school, young Issa's devotion to the Eastern Orthodox Church was always, and continues to be, strong. He was once punished by detention until a late hour in the evening because he refused to say, as the catechism book required him and as his teacher insisted, that the Orthodox were schismatic. He argued with his teacher that it was the Catholics who were, because their Pope in Rome separated himself in 1054 from the unanimity of the four ancient Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem; the Pope was only *primus inter pares*, but he wanted to dominate the other Patriarchs. Young Issa inspired, or instigated perhaps, the other Eastern Orthodox students in class to stick by this idea and they were punished with him, but they were released from detention earlier in the evening and he was left behind as their leader. The teacher went home and left young Issa with the resident deputy director of the college, who saw that he was going nowhere with the young rebel and finally let him go. He was only fourteen at the time but he stood for the freedom of conscience and defended historical facts, knowing, even at this tender age, that history depended on interpretation.

After his graduation, young Issa worked for a while as Accounts Officer in the British Government of Palestine then for Barclay's Bank, a British-owned bank in Jerusalem. He was considering a career in law for, during the academic year 1947–1948, he enrolled in night classes at the Law School of Jerusalem. He took courses on "The Principles of Jurisprudence," "Constitutional Law," "The Law

of Contracts,” “Majallat al-Aḥkām al-Shar‘iyya,” and “Waqf,” given by British and Palestinian (Arab and Jewish) professors to students of Arab and Jewish background. But the violent clashes between Arabs and Jews and the termination of the British Mandate on May 15, 1948 led to the closing down of the Law School. In addition to the disruption of his studies, he also lost his bank job and was left without any means of livelihood.

The Arab defeat in the Palestine war of 1948, known in Arab annals as the *nakba* (disaster), did not deter young Issa from picking up the pieces and going on with his life. Between 1949 and 1968, he worked as a teacher of Arabic literature in several secondary schools such as De La Salle College in Jerusalem (1949–1952); Ahliyya College in Ramallah (1952–1953); St. George’s School in Jerusalem (1953–1968) where he was also deputy headmaster for academic affairs. He also taught at the St. George Theological College between 1962–1966 as a lecturer on Islam. Besides his teaching, he was active in the Eastern Orthodox Church and in the 1950s and 1960s he was a member of the Board of Directors of the Arab Orthodox Union Club in Jerusalem. He used to give public lectures on a variety of subjects including Arabic literature at the Club (and also at the YMCA) in Jerusalem. In those days, the Arab Orthodox Union Clubs in Palestine were not only sites for social and sportive activities but also places where Arab Orthodox youth strengthened their religious and cultural identity.

As a testimonial to his Jerusalem impact, many of his former students went on to occupy prominent academic as well as political positions, and to play influential roles in Palestinian life. These included Dr. Sari Nusseibeh, currently president of al-Quds University; lawyer Jonathan Kuttab, human rights activist on behalf of the Palestinians; Mubarak Awad, the Palestinian pacifist who advocates passive resistance; Jack Khazmo, editor of *al-Bayādir al-Siyāsī*, the foremost Arab political and news weekly under Israeli occupation in the West Bank; Ibrahim Sous, poet, novelist, musician, and former diplomatic representative of the PLO in Paris; Najji Alloush, poet, literary critic, political writer, and former Secretary-General of the Union of Palestinian Writers and Journalists, among many others.

Issa Boullata met Marita Joan Seward, in Jerusalem in 1957, when she was visiting the Holy City with other American university students. They met again in Europe in 1959 and got engaged in Geneva, then she returned to New York for a year to finish her Bachelor’s

studies in French and Library Science. They two got married in Jerusalem in 1960 and had all their four children there: Joseph, Barbara, David, and Peter. Joseph (b. 1961) is a Doctor of Pharmacy and is Associate Professor of Pharmacy at Temple University in Philadelphia. He is married and has two children. Issa's and Marita's daughter Barbara (b. 1963) had a musical education in Montreal and now works for a computer firm in Toronto. David (b. 1965) has a B.A. in Communications and is a popular announcer on Radio Mix-96 in Montreal, professionally known as "David Tyler." He is married and has one son. Peter (b. 1967) has a B.A. in Creative Writing and published a few poems and short stories. He recently joined the University of Toronto for a Master's degree in Religious Studies. Professor Issa Boullata once remarked to me, "My wife, my children and their spouses, and my grandchildren are the most valuable part of my . . . life," a simple acknowledgment of priorities that is often overlooked by many of us in the academy when we allow our career goals to come before our family commitments.

A short while after his marriage, Issa Boullata enrolled in the University of London. Four years later, he distinguished himself by obtaining his B.A. (Honours) First Class in Arabic and Islamics. With remarkable perseverance, Issa Boullata went on to start his graduate studies at the same university, and in 1969, he received his Ph.D. in Arabic literature. His doctoral thesis, written under the academic advice of Dr. Walid Arafat, was a study of the life and poetical works of the Iraqi-born Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb (1926–1964). His external examiner was Professor M.M. Badawi of Oxford University.

The Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the eventual Israeli occupation of Arab lands was the second national disaster, after the 1948 loss of Palestine, which Professor Boullata bitterly experienced. A year later, the indignities of living under Israeli occupation proved too much to bear, so when he was offered an academic position in the USA, he did not hesitate to accept it.

In 1968, Professor Boullata moved with his young family to Hartford, Connecticut, and became Assistant Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Hartford Seminary, and in 1970 Associate Professor. The same year he began his work as a co-editor with Willem Bijlefeld of the well-known journal *The Muslim World* (established in 1911).

In 1975, Professor Boullata was invited to teach Arabic literature, Arabic language, and Qur'anic Studies at McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies. From 1975 onward, he continued to teach at the

Institute of Islamic Studies and in 1979 he was promoted to the rank of full professor. For the last few years he has served the Institute of Islamic Studies in different administrative capacities: from 1981–1982 he was Acting Assistant Director of the Institute; 1982–1983 Assistant Director, 1983–1984 Acting Director; and 1986–1990 Assistant Director. Between 1993–1995, he was Director of McGill University's Indonesia IAIN Development Project. In the Winter term of 1994, he was Visiting Professor, Graduate Studies, IAIN, Jakarta, Indonesia. Due to his remarkable abilities as a negotiator he managed to secure the financial support of both the Canadian and Indonesian governments for the enlargement and renewal of the Project for five years (1995–2000—development funds in the vicinity of \$16.6 million.) He played an important role in the Indonesia exchange program at McGill University as well as in the graduate program of the Institute of Islamic Studies until his retirement on December 31, 1998. In a post-retirement position, he continues now to contribute to higher education in Islamic studies and Arabic literature.

I first met Professor Boullata in the early 1980s during one of the annual conferences of the Middle East Studies Association. I approached him about the possibility of enrolling in the M.A. program at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University. I was interested in writing a thesis on the Egyptian vernacular poet Aḥmad Fu'ād Nigm. Professor Boullata's response to me was very encouraging. I joined the Institute and enrolled in several courses in Islamic Studies and Arabic literature. For one of the courses in Arabic literature, my term paper was a brief study of the way the European was depicted in the vernacular works of the Egyptian poets Bayram al-Tūnisī and Aḥmad Fu'ād Nigm. Professor Boullata liked my paper and advised me to publish it. So it was with much pride and excitement that I set out to publish my first paper (see my "The *Khawāga* Then and Now: Images of the West in Modern Egyptian *Zajal*," *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 19 (1988), 162–178). It was his encouragement and support that sustained me during my stint as a graduate student at McGill.

His course offerings at McGill testify to his wide scope of intellectual expertise and interests. These courses include Arabic language, Arabic literature, both medieval and modern, and Qur'anic Studies (*Tafsīr* and *Ijāz*). Every year, he teaches a course in the works of a major Arab author—a medieval or a modern literary figure or a thinker and this ranges from al-Jāhīz, al-Tawḥīdī, and Ibn al-Fārīd

to Najīb Maḥfūz and Bint al-Shāṭi'. In addition to his teaching and administrative duties, Professor Boullata supervised every year a sizable number of Ph.D. and M.A. students. A number of dissertations he supervised at McGill University or at other academic institutions, have later been published in book-form. These included: Yvonne Haddad (at Hartford Seminary), *Contemporary Islam and the Challenge of History* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1982); Hanan Awwad, *Arab Causes in the Fiction of Ghādah al-Sammān, 1961–1975* (Sherbrooke, Quebec: Editions Naaman, 1983); Norma Salim, *Habib Bourguiba: Islam and the Creation of Tunisia* (London: Croom Helm, 1984); John Asfour, co-supervised with Louis Dudek and Charles Adams (English Department, McGill), *When the Words Burn: An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry, 1945–1987* (Dunvegan, Ontario: Cormorant Books, 1988); Kamal Abdel-Malek, *A Study of the Vernacular Poetry of Ahmad Fu'ād Nigm* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990) and *Muḥammad in the Modern Egyptian Popular Ballad* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995). Other dissertations included Arthur W. Shippee, "Mircea Eliade's concept of myth: a study of its possible relevancy to an understanding of Islam," (1975); Ahmad Tahir, "The Social Writings of Shaykh 'Uthmān b. Fūdī." (1989); John Calvert, "Discourse, community, and power: Sayyid Quṭb and the Islamic movement in Egypt" (1994); Amila Buturovic, "Sociology of popular drama in medieval Egypt: Ibn Dāniyāl and his shadow plays," (1994); Karim H. Karim, co-supervised with George Szanto, "Constructions of the Islamic Threat in the Press: Media Discourses on Power and Violence," (1996), among others.

His own publications include *al-Rūmanṭiqiyya wa Ma'ālimuhā fī al-Shi'r al-'Arabī al-Hadīth* (Romanticism and Its Features in Modern Arabic Poetry, 1960) which traces the development of Romanticism in the West and its manifestations in the poetry of modern Arabs. His doctoral thesis on Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb was published in Beirut (in Arabic) in 1971 and because of its scholarly importance it has been reprinted several times in Beirut as well as in other Arab capitals. Al-Sayyāb's work was also the topic of several articles by him in English such as: "Badr Shakir al-Sayyab: A Life of Vision and Agony" (1970), "Al-Sayyāb and the Free Verse Movement" (1970), and "The Poetic Technique of Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb 1926–1964" (1971). He extols the sincerity, *al-ṣidq*, in al-Sayyāb's poetry and criticizes what he regards as the formalism and hypocrisy of much of the modern Arabic poetry. In a 1971 article Boullata states, "... the tragically human anguish which it portrays, and the impotence and

the bewilderment of a man grappling defencelessly with the intriguing problems of pain and death which it paints commend it to our sympathies. There is hardly any philosophical solution suggested in it, for the riddle of life is only faced with more questioning than answering. But its simplicity, sincerity and intimacy are appealing. Odysseus and Sinbad, as two eternal wanderers seeking truth and happiness, and Job, as the archetype of fortitude, are the mainstay of its imagery. If it succeeded only in putting to shame the formalism and hypocrisy of much modern Arabic poetry, it would have served an important purpose.” (From his “The Poetic Technique of Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb 1926–1964,” *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 2 (1971): 115.)

Filling in a felt gap in up-to-date anthologies of modern Arabic poetry, he published *Modern Arab Poets 1950–1975* (1976). Two years later, he published a translation, with an introduction, of the life-story of Aḥmad Amīn, one of the most important Egyptian modernizers and educators. And in 1980, he rendered the field of Arabic literature a great service by collecting several critical essays including some of his own, otherwise scattered in different scholarly journals, and making them available in one volume under the title, *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature 1945–1980*. Among his translations are Emily Nasrallah’s *Flight Against Time* (1987, 1997) and Mohamed Berrada’s *The Game of Forgetting* (1996, 1997).

Professor Boullata has been a member of several scholarly organizations such as the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), American Association of Teachers of Arabic (AATA)—he was its President in 1983 and also a member of its Board of Directors for two three-year terms, member of the Canadian Society for the Study of Rhetoric, member of the International (as well as American and Canadian) Comparative Literature Association(s), among others.

In addition to publishing his own scholarly work and translations, Professor Boullata held a number of editorial positions. He was the editor of *Al-‘Arabiyya*, the Journal of the American Association of Teachers of Arabic (AATA). Along with Muhsin Mahdi, Salih Altoma, David Partington, and Fawzi Abdulrazak, he is a member of the editorial board of *Mundus Arabicus*, an annual journal that focuses on Arabic literature. The first issue of the latter dealt with the topic of “Adab al-Mahjar” (Arabic literature penned by Arab authors who have resided in the Americas) and the most recent with “The Arabic Novel Since 1950” (1992) which Professor Boullata edited with an

introduction. He also was guest editor of *Arabic Oral Traditions* (1989) which was a special issue of *Oral Tradition*. In addition to his own introduction, the issue contains several articles on different aspects of the oral traditions in the Arab world. The issue serves as one of the most valuable works in English on the subject.

*The Arabic Novel Since 1950* (1992) a special issue of *Mundus Arabicus* deals, as the title indicates, with the recent developments in the Arabic novel since mid-century. In his introduction, Professor Boullata remarks that “[t]he Arabic novel has begun to exhibit a marked measure of regional variety and local color, and to deal with a wide spectrum of subjects and concerns. It has surmounted many of the earlier technical problems related to language, structure, plot, setting, and characterization; and some of the younger novelists have become so sure of their art that they have embarked on innovative experimentation in modes of narration and fictional techniques.” (*The Arabic Novel Since 1950*: ix). The book contains interviews with two prominent novelists: the Egyptian Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī and the Palestinian Emile Habiby, both have contributed eminently to the creative novelistic experimentations in the contemporary Arab world. As Professor Boullata explains, the interviews “explore the personal background of this experimentation and try to understand the factors leading to these two novelists’ new narrative techniques and assess their importance for new directions in the Arabic novel.” (p. x). The interviews are followed by nine articles by both Arab and Western scholars dealing with the various problems and needs of the contemporary Arabic novel.

In 1990, Professor Boullata published his *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (State University of New York Press) which presents the attempts by Arab intellectuals since 1967 to accommodate Arab culture to modern times, to bring about social justice and individual freedoms, and to fulfill the need for “positive Arab participation in building and sustaining a peaceful and prosperous international community that includes them.” (p. ix) The topics of this book are: “the dilemmas of the Arab intellectuals,” “the Arab heritage in contemporary Arab discourse,” “the modern relevance of Islam and the Qur’ān,” “dependency and cultural liberation,” “voices of Arab women,” “the intellectual crisis and legitimacy”. The book is an indispensable contribution to Arab studies, providing analyses of contemporary Arab thought and opening vistas for further research in vital areas of intellectual inquiry. He surprised Arab literary cir-

cles by publishing a first novel in Arabic entitled *ʿĀ'id ilā al-Quds* (Beirut, 1998), now being translated into English by Bassam Frangieh of Yale, chronicling the lives of Arab characters in the Middle East, Europe, and North America caught in the cross-currents of recent history and fired by love as well as by ambition and power. The Arab critic Muḥsin Jāsīm al-Mūsawī devoted a chapter to this novel in his study on the Arabic novel after Maḥfūz (see his *Infirāt al-Iqd al-Muqaddas*, Cairo, 1999) and in a recent review of it, Bassam Frangieh stated that with this piece of fiction, Issa Boullata “. . . has marked a new trend in Palestinian literature.” Then he concludes, “This post-peace process novel is a welcome contribution to modern Arabic literature. Despite its tragic end, it concludes on a positive note: the return to the land, in a way, reflecting the new political reality in the region. In *Returning to Haifa* (1969), as well as in all his other works, Ghassan Kanafani insisted on return by means of armed struggle, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s protagonists neither return nor rest; Emile Habibi cautions against leaving the land. Boullata’s hero alone returns in peace.” (Bassam Frangieh, “Returning in Peace,” *Banipal* (February 1999): 83).

Professor Boullata has just finished editing a book entitled “Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur’ān” which is scheduled to be published by Curzon Press in 1999.

As would be expected of a scholar of his calibre, Professor Boullata is the recipient of several awards for excellence such as the 1972 Arberry Memorial Prize awarded by the Pembroke Arabic Research Group at Cambridge University for his article on the poet Tawfiq Ṣāyigh, titled, “The Beleaguered Unicorn: A Study of Tawfiq Ṣāyigh,” and which appeared in *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 4 (1973). In 1993, he won the University of Arkansas Press Award for Arabic Literature in Translation for his translation of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s autobiographical *Al-Biʿr al-Ūlā* (London, 1987) under the title *The First Well: A Bethlehem Boyhood* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1995). He also won the 1997 Award for his translation of Ghada Samman’s *The Square Moon* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1998). As a testimony to his distinguished position as a scholar and teacher he is cited in several international directories including the following: *Who’s Who in the World*, *Who’s Who in Religion*, *The International Authors and Writers Who’s Who*, *Who’s Who in the East*, *Men of Achievement*, *Directory of Contemporary Arab Writers: Biographies and Autobiographies*, among others.

Apart from his teaching and scholarly work, Professor Boullata has been active in the affairs of the Arab communities in North America. For many years, he has been a member of the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) and he organized several events in support of Arab causes—most notably the 1982 AAUG Fifteenth Annual Convention in Montreal. He was also the 1997 President of the Canadian-Arab Organization for Human Rights.

Among his students, Professor Boullata is known for his strictness; he expects the assigned work to be turned in on time and in as perfect a shape as possible. For him, if something is worth doing, then it must be done well. But his intellectual rigor, which he exhibits and expects in others, is always tempered by his warmth towards his students and his genuine concern for their interest and well being. The man has a unique ability to give clear guidance without being heavy-handed, to offer criticisms without giving offense, to encourage without resorting to effusive praise, and to set a good example without drawing much attention to his many merits.

At the end of this brief biographical profile, I would like to add that what has struck me about Professor Boullata is his resilience, his ability, despite national and family tragedies, to forge ahead, and not only survive, as an intellectual exile, but build and prosper, and in the process contribute eminently to the life of the mind.

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## LITERARY CREATIVITY AND THE CULTURAL HERITAGE: THE *ATLĀL* IN MODERN ARABIC FICTION

HILARY KILPATRICK

The debate about the nature and value of the Arab cultural heritage (*turāth*) and its function at the present, when the Arab countries are facing immense challenges—some common to the whole of mankind, others specific to the region—has become more urgent in the last three decades. In his study of intellectual debates in the Arab world, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought*, Professor Boullata has devoted a chapter to this subject, presenting and commenting on the standpoints taken by leading thinkers, critics and writers towards the Arab cultural heritage in conferences or publications.<sup>1</sup> His survey, an invaluable guide to the ongoing discussions, is inevitably concerned with the theoretical issues. This contribution to the volume honouring him is conceived as a case study of how one of the most ancient elements of the *turāth* has been taken up by Arab writers of the last hundred years and used to explore experiences and situations far removed from those for which it was originally conceived—a practical illustration, as it were, of the relevance of the cultural heritage to modern social change.

In all literatures, much creativity consists of the adaptation and reworking of elements of the heritage in response to new experiences and conditions. When a literary tradition possesses a founding epic, such as the *Odyssey* or the *Mahabharata*, characters or situations from it can be used time and time again in new contexts; indeed successive manifestations of heroes such as Odysseus-Ulysses form part of the history of European literature. Arabic literature has no comparable epic, but its founding texts, the pre-Islamic *qaṣīdas*, contain motifs which poets and writers have continued to rework up to the present time. One such, the *atḷāl* motif, is the subject of the following remarks.

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<sup>1</sup> Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), ch. 2, "The Arab Heritage in Contemporary Arab Discourse."

*Qifā nabkī min dhikrā ḥabībin wa-manzilī*: this half line, one of the most emotive in Arabic poetry,<sup>2</sup> which begins the *Mu‘allaqa* of Imru’ al-Qays, introduces an exemplary expression of the *aṭlāl* motif. Having returned to the deserted encampment where he and his beloved used to meet, the poet recalls their love in a landscape where nature has reasserted itself, effacing the signs of habitation from the places he carefully names.

While the return to once familiar surroundings and the recollection of events which occurred there is a universal experience, the disappearance of human habitation and a human presence from those surroundings is something which, under normal circumstances, belongs only to the nomadic way of life.<sup>3</sup> The *aṭlāl* motif is thus in origin a quintessentially Arabian bedouin manifestation of the universal theme of return and remembering, likely to have parallels only in the poetry of other nomadic peoples.

The *aṭlāl* motif established itself as a fundamental part of the Arabic literary repertoire,<sup>4</sup> to be developed by poets in subsequent periods in a variety of ways continuing or contrasting with the pre-Islamic convention. The poet’s heart was transformed by metaphor into an encampment where the traces of love were still visible;<sup>5</sup> the *aṭlāl* were seen as a symbol of the transitoriness of everything in this world; the convention of beginning a poem with a bedouin motif

<sup>2</sup> As has been observed, it is next to impossible to convey the overtones of this line fully in translation [A.F.L. Beeston, T.M. Johnstone, R.B. Sergeant and G.R. Smith (eds.), *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 52, n. 99]. The version given there runs: “Stop, both of you. Let us weep for the memory of a beloved and an abode. . . .”

<sup>3</sup> Return to a familiar place which has been devastated and deserted is otherwise associated with wars or natural disasters.

<sup>4</sup> This was partly thanks to Ibn Qutayba, who included it in his normative, and over-simplified, description of the *qaṣīda*; cf. Ibn Qutaiba, *Introduction au Livre de la Poésie et des Poètes*, ed. tr. and comm. Gaudefroy-Demombynes (Paris: Société d’édition “*Les Belles Lettres*,” 1947), 13. Some five hundred years later, the 8th/14th century philosopher of history Ibn Khaldūn listed several examples of it, including Imru’ al-Qays’ line, in his chapter on poetry: ‘Abd al-Rahmān ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Muqaddima* (Cairo: Al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubrā, n.d.), 571. For a study of the ways in which the *aṭlāl* and other motifs of the *nasīb* evolved in the later Arabic poetic tradition see Jaroslav Stetkevych, *The Zephyrs of Najd: The Poetics of Nostalgia in the Classical Arabic Nasīb* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> As in al-Mutanabbī’s panegyric of the *qāḍī* Abū l-Fāḍil Aḥmad ibn ‘Abdallāh al-Anṭākī, quoted as exordium to Emile Ḥabībī’s *Ikhṭayya*, which is discussed below. For the poem, see Nāṣif al-Yāzījī, *Al-‘Urf al-Ṭayyib fī Sharḥ Dīwān Abī l-Ṭayyib* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir/Dār Bayrūt, 1384/1964), 348 ff.

was ridiculed by poets with an urban background and sensibility. But however the motif evolved, its original features, the evocation of memories, the elegiac recollection of love, the mention of emotive places-names, and the allusion to a Bedouin setting by means of characteristic terms,<sup>6</sup> remained part of literary culture, preserved as they were in authoritative texts such as the *Muʿallaqāt*.

With its long and rich history, the *aṭlāl* motif has acquired the status of an archetype in Arabic literature. It continues to inspire writers, and in modern Arabic literature it has extended its range significantly by migrating into narrative prose; it has even crossed language boundaries. To trace the adaptation of this ancient motif to modern forms of prose fiction and to reveal the significations which it acquires in its new contexts is to investigate one dimension of creativity in modern Arabic literature.

It might be expected that the Pasha whose resurrection marks the beginning of Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī's *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām* (1909)<sup>7</sup> would indulge frequently in the kind of lamentation to which the *aṭlāl* motif lends itself. But as a former Minister of War,<sup>8</sup> firmly conscious of his rank, he is not given to introspection or elegiac reminiscences, and what he sees, as ʿĪsā accompanies him through Cairo, is so strange that he is chiefly occupied in trying to understand it. Nonetheless al-Muwayliḥī, who was thoroughly versed in Arabic literature, found a plausible way to work in this evocative and venerable motif.<sup>9</sup> In need of money to pay the lawyer who has successfully defended him, the Pasha recalls the pious foundation he endowed before his death and sets out to look for it. His weeping as he sees

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. *EI* 2, art. "Nasīb" (Renate Jacobi). Jacobi distinguishes three generic features of the *nasīb*: "a) an elegaic concept of love, b) the evocation of memories and c) a Bedouin setting alluded to by generic signals, i.e. place names of the Hijaz, traditional names of the beloved, terms and formulas from pre-Islamic love poetry." But given the significance attached universally to the naming of important names, I believe this feature should be distinguished from the specific use of Bedouin or Hijazi place-names along with other elements to create a Bedouin atmosphere. The texts discussed below exploit the power of place-names which are by no means Bedouin.

<sup>7</sup> *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām* had already appeared in instalments in the Muwayliḥī's paper *Miṣbāḥ al-Sharq* from 1898 to 1902 (Roger Allen, *A Period of Time*, St. Antony's Middle East Monographs 27 (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1992), 34–5).

<sup>8</sup> He is Aḥmad Pāshā al-Manīkalī, Minister of War under Muḥammad ʿAlī (ibid., 49).

<sup>9</sup> As far as I know al-Muwayliḥī's use of the Arabic literary heritage still awaits detailed study.

the outlines of once-familiar landmarks now in ruin is likened to that of the Umayyad poets Kuthayyir and al-Farazdaq; these references not only link the passage to literary tradition, but prepare the reader for the dilapidated *waqf* buildings themselves. One of the Pasha's former retainers recounts how all the wealth he left has been dissipated by his descendants, and the mosque, *kuttāb* and fountain he endowed have been turned into a dyeing factory, a warehouse and a tavern respectively.<sup>10</sup>

The *aṭlāl* motif is only an insignificant brick in the edifice of *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām*, which is in any case a loosely structured work.<sup>11</sup> Al-Muwayliḥī does not return to it or allow it to affect the tone of the whole. Moreover, despite the inclusion of characteristic words (*rusūm*, *aṭlāl*, *diyār*) and a line of poetry, the motif, as used here, is incomplete; there is no real evocation of a beloved, or of a well-loved friend or relative, another meaning of *ḥabīb*. Al-Muwayliḥī's achievement is to have realised that the *aṭlāl* can be employed in a new way, that is, to mark not only the natural changes brought about by the passage of time, but also the mutations resulting from new economic and cultural conditions. Traditional forms of charitable endowment furthering religious practice, learning and public welfare have been replaced by industrial and commercial concerns, sometimes of a reprehensible kind, and this qualitative change occurs alongside the transformations caused by the ravages of time.<sup>12</sup> Used to explore the move away from traditional institutions, the *aṭlāl* motif becomes linked to the reflection on modernisation in the Arab world, and *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām* offers an early example, perhaps the earliest, of this new interpretation of weeping at the deserted encampment.

Al-Muwayliḥī also realised, perhaps unconsciously, that the *aṭlāl*'s move into prose entails a rethinking of their place in the structure of the work. In the *qaṣīda*, the poet suddenly arrives at the well-remembered place, and the poem starts off. What led him to set out, whether he came to the familiar haunts by chance or design,

<sup>10</sup> Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī, *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām aw Faṭra min al-Zaman*, 3rd ed. (Cairo, Maṭbaʿat al-Saʿāda, 1341/1923), 88–9. The passage comes at the beginning of chapter 8, entitled “Al-Waqf.”

<sup>11</sup> Allen, *A Period of Time*, 58, summarising the discussion of structure 49–58.

<sup>12</sup> In addition the *waqf* trusts were subject to radical reorganisation during the 19th century and often misused (ibid., 157, n. 3). For a concise survey of changes in the organization and administration of *waqfs* during the 19th century, see, e.g., A. Chris Eccel, *Egypt, Islam and Social Change: Al-Azhar in Conflict and Accommodation*, *Islamkundliche Untersuchungen* 81 (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1984), 73–78.

what he thought about on the way, whether the journey was difficult: the old poems are silent on these points. They exist within a tradition which accepts the convention of a fragmentary narrative structure and does not require the poet to justify his deeds. By contrast, modern narrative forms, as a rule, require a minimum of motivation for characters' actions and a degree of information about their thoughts and feelings before, while or after they perform them. Consequently, the *aṭlāl* motif does not usually occur at the very beginning of a work, and the character's reflections while he or she is travelling to the scene of the memories acquire considerable importance. This adaptation of the motif to modern narrative conventions can already be observed in *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā ibn Hishām*.

Whereas the *aṭlāl* lead a secluded existence in Al-Muwayliḥī's work, they appear to receive the greatest prominence in one of Yūsuf al-Sibāʿī's novels, called precisely *Bayn al-Aṭlāl*.<sup>13</sup> But appearances are deceptive; the *aṭlāl* are only referred to at the end of the book, an improbably romantic tale which concludes with the heroine bringing up the child of her true love and his wife, both of whom have died. She is living in his house, surrounded by his possessions, and her situation is summed up as follows: "It is not love of the dwelling which has occupied my heart, but love of the dwelling's inhabitants."<sup>14</sup>

But the earlier part of the book does not prepare the reader for this tardy allusion to the *aṭlāl* motif. For instance, no special significance is attached to place, in this case the lover's house, and there are no emotive place-names. More seriously, memory, *dhikrā*, cannot play a central part, because Al-Sibāʿī has chosen to narrate the action straightforwardly, as it takes place, not through a series of flashbacks. Moreover, he is not concerned with the inner life of his heroine. The title is only relevant to the final situation, and the line of poetry merely functions to round it off. *Bayn al-aṭlāl* in fact provides an interesting example of a failure to understand the true nature of the motif and to see how it can be applied to a modern situation.

If I have included a text originally written in English in this paper, it is not as a provocation but because the *aṭlāl* motif as it appears there bears a striking resemblance to its pre-Islamic form. Isaak Diq's

<sup>13</sup> Yūsuf Al-Sibāʿī, *Bayn al-Aṭlāl* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanjī, 1952). I am indebted to Prof. Geert Jan van Gelder of Oxford University for drawing my attention to this book.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 152 (*fa-lā ḥubbu l-diyāri shaghala qalbī/wa-lākin ḥubbu man sakana l-diyāra*).

*A Bedouin Boyhood* (1967)<sup>15</sup> consists of a series of sketches of life in a semi-settled Palestinian bedouin tribe before and after its expulsion from its ancestral land in the newly-established state of Israel. Some of the sketches reflect the principal narrator's experiences, others go back to tribal memory. Together they recreate the customs and values of a community whose way of life is a survival from earlier times, and who in the course of the book become victims of a history made by others. Towards the middle of *A Bedouin Boyhood*, the chapter entitled "The Return" describes how the narrator is sent to boarding school in Beersheba and goes back to his tribe for the holidays. He returns twice. The first time he has been at school for several months, and when he arrives back at the tribal lands he finds people working in the fields, animals grazing, the tents pitched and friends and relatives coming out to welcome him. The second time, two years later, everything is silent, the fields are empty with heaps of corn reaped and ready to be collected, the people and domestic animals have disappeared. Walking on, the boy sees that the newly built houses are deserted. And beyond them he notices in one of the harvested fields white trodden spots from newly removed black tents, and black stones of hearths which have just been abandoned. The only familiar being in this desolation is his grandfather's dog, who has stayed behind to be with her puppies, and the last sound he hears as he leaves the deserted encampment is her mournful howling.<sup>16</sup>

The *aṭlāl* here correspond almost exactly to those of a pre-Islamic *qaṣīda*, but they have acquired a significance none of the old poets would have dreamed of. They indicate an essential change in the life not of an individual but of an entire community. After their expulsion from Israel, the tribesmen experience economic disaster and social disruption, but they cling to their traditional values and at least the older ones among them believe that they will return to their land one day and resume their ancestral way of life. From their stories which the author includes, they emerge as tragic, heroic figures, who seek to maintain in exile the principles of endurance, honesty and solidarity at the heart of bedouin society. The latter part of *A Bedouin Boyhood* moves between the "now" of exile and the "then"

<sup>15</sup> Isaak Diqs, *A Bedouin Boyhood* (London: George Allen and Unwin, repr. 1984) (first published 1967). I have discussed this book briefly in "Arab Fiction in English: A Case of Dual Nationality," *New Comparison* 13 (1992), 48-50.

<sup>16</sup> Diqs, *A Bedouin Boyhood*, 64-8.

of life in Wadi al-Hisi, the two separated by the *atlāl*, which are all the more uncanny because the expulsion itself is not described. Thus, while the motif has returned to its roots, it has also extended its range and shown it can be used to convey political and civilisational change.

Diq̄s is not the only Palestinian writer to have used the *atlāl* motif in his writings. The beginning of Ghassān Kanafānī's *ʿĀ'id ilā Ḥayfā* (1969)<sup>17</sup> portrays the main character, the prosperous middle class Saʿīd S., and his wife on the outskirts of Haifa, returning for the first time after nineteen years to the city they fled from in 1948. Close to tears, they recall the nightmare of their departure, the shooting, the panic-stricken crowds, the blocked-off side streets preventing them from going anywhere except towards the harbour, and above all their being parted from the baby son they could not go back to fetch. In his attempt to fight his way through the crush on that terrible day, Saʿīd is compared to a hunted animal caught in thick undergrowth, while the crowd itself is compared to a torrent carrying everything along with it.

As they drive through Haifa in the summer of 1967, Saʿīd and Ṣafīyya notice no changes in the city. They find the way to their house without difficulty, the same three cypresses are standing in the side street, and when they reach their flat, they discover that its Jewish occupants have kept the furnishings almost exactly as they were. There is a bitter irony in the fact that the dwelling, the *manzil*, has altered so little, whereas the people: Saʿīd, Ṣafīyya and the son they unwittingly abandoned, Khaldūn-Dov, have had their lives disrupted. In a reversal of the pre-Islamic situation, it is the place which has withstood the ravages of time far better than its original inhabitants.

*ʿĀ'id ilā Ḥayfā* is considered by critics to be Kanafānī's most unsatisfactory novel, clearly written in a hurry, uncharacteristically classical in its technique and suffering from a number of artistic shortcomings such as weaknesses in construction.<sup>18</sup> Reflecting its author's analysis

<sup>17</sup> Ghassān Kanafānī, *ʿĀ'id ilā Ḥayfā* in *Al-Āthār al-Kāmila. 1. Al-Riwāyāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'a, 1972), 339–414. For recollections of the flight, see 346–56.

<sup>18</sup> Raḍwā ʿĀshūr, *Al-Ṭarīq ilā al-Khayma al-Ukhrā: Dirāsa fī A'māl Ghassān Kanafānī* (ʿAkkā: Dār al-Aswār, 1977), 137–46; Amal Zayn al-Dīn and Jūzīf Bāsil, *Ṭaṭawwur al-Wā'y fī Namādhij Qaṣaṣīyya Filasṭīniyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥadātha, 1980), 228–9; Muhammad Siddiq, *Man Is a Cause. Political Consciousness and the Fiction of Ghassān Kanafānī* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 49–62. For a more favourable

of the political situation immediately after the June 1967 war, it seeks to instil in the Palestinians who fled, particularly the middle class, the consciousness of their own part of responsibility for the débacle of 1948, and a new understanding of the concept "homeland" as something to be fought for. Whatever means might exist to express this didactic purpose in an artistically convincing form, Kanafānī has not used them. By contrast, the sections of the novel which portray the return to Haifa and the memory of the flight in 1948 are heavily indebted to the *atlāl* motif and to some images in pre-Islamic poetry, such as that of the flood sweeping all along with it.<sup>19</sup> One critic has described these passages as "realistically unconvincing, although poetically compelling,"<sup>20</sup> and they are so effective because they draw on a centuries-old tradition of poetic creation and evoke an immediate and profound response in their readers.

Whether Kanafānī resorted to the *atlāl* motif intentionally is not certain. It is worth bearing in mind that he himself, as a boy, was caught up in the flight of Palestinians from 'Akkā as the Haganah advanced on it,<sup>21</sup> and so what Sa'īd and his wife experience in Haifa corresponds in its main lines to a traumatic event in his own life. Thus his perhaps instinctive employment of the motif could have been prompted as much by his own harrowing memories as by the demands of the work he was engaged on. At all events, there is a contradiction between the theme of the Palestinians' need to recognise their guilt in abandoning their country and the portrayal of the abandonment itself, which is represented as inevitable. And this contradiction parallels a disequilibrium between the didactic, abstract tone of most of the book and the powerfully emotive passages which hark back to the *atlāl* and the literary heritage.

Like Kanafānī, Emile (Imīl) Ḥabībī was engaged in politics for most of his life. Like him too, he was a prominent innovator in

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view, see Salma Khadra Jayyusi (ed. and introd.), *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 30. See also Susan Slyomovics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 22–24, for the role of memory of place in this novel.

<sup>19</sup> "Sayl/suyūl" occurs for instance in the *Mu'allaqas* of Imru' al-Qays and Labīd; cf. "fi saylihim al-'arim al-jabbār," "suyūl al-bashar" (Kanafānī, *Ā'id ilā Ḥayfā*, 354, 356).

<sup>20</sup> Siddiq, *Man Is a Cause*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Stefan Wild, *Ghassan Kanafānī. The Life of a Palestinian* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), 10–11. As Wild observes, Kanafānī drew partly on his own experience for the account of the flight from Palestine in the short story "*Arḍ al-Burtuqāl al-Hazīn*."

Arabic narrative prose. But Ḥabībī maintained that he did not use fiction as a means for political instruction, considering it rather as a safety valve when pressures became unbearable.<sup>22</sup> His profound knowledge of the Arabic literary heritage, both élite and popular, furnished him with an inexhaustible store of historical figures and situations, images and proverbial sayings with which to illustrate and comment on the bitter fate of the Palestinians living in Israel.<sup>23</sup>

The novella *Ikhṭayya* (1985)<sup>24</sup> offers an example of his skill in this respect. It opens with a quotation from al-Mutanabbī:

*Laki yā manāzilū fī l-qulūbi manāzilū  
aqfarti anti wa-hunna minki awāhilū  
wa-anā lladhī jtalaba l-manīyyata ṭarfuhū  
fa-mani l-muṭālabu wa-l-qatīlu l-qātīlū*<sup>25</sup>

These *aṭlāl* have been transformed by metaphor into places of memory in the heart, inhabited and alive when the physical sites are deserted. Recollection, then, and the preservation of memories are at the centre of the work.<sup>26</sup>

In the first part, an enormous traffic jam in Haifa and the Israeli

<sup>22</sup> Imīl Ḥabībī, *Sudāsīyyat al-Ayyām al-Sitta* (Haifa: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Taʿāwuniyya, n.d.), 7–8. But cf. Hāshim Yāghī, *Al-Riwāya wa-Imīl Ḥabībī* (n.p.: Sharikat al-Fajr, 1989), 121, for a dissenting view of Ḥabībī's practice.

<sup>23</sup> For Ḥabībī's familiarity with Arabic and foreign literatures, see Saleh Srouji, *Emīl Ḥabībī—ein arabischer Literat aus Israel. Die Suche des Palastinensers nach dem Selbst unter verschärfsten Bedingungen, reflektiert in seinem Schaffen bis 1985* (Augsburg: Dr. Bernd Wissner Verlag, 1993), 34–38.

<sup>24</sup> Imīl Ḥabībī, *Ikhṭayya* (Nicosia: Mu'assasat Baysān Bris, 1985). The title is also the name invented by Ḥabībī for one of the characters; it is derived from a colloquial expression meaning roughly "It's a disgrace" (Srouji, *Imīl Ḥabībī*, 197–8). I follow Srouji's transliteration of the name; the alternative *Ikhṭīyeh* is found in Jayyusi, *Anthology*, 454, and Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel. An Historical and Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 74, n. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Ll. 1 and 3 of al-Mutanabbī's panegyric of the *qādī* Abū l-Fāḍil Aḥmad b. ʿAbdallāh al-Anṭākī (Nāṣif al-Yazījī, *Al-ʿUrf al-Ṭayyib I*, 348–9). ("Dwellings, you have a place in our hearts; though you may be deserted, you still people them. By my glance I brought my fate on myself. Who can be held responsible, when the victim and the killer are one?")

<sup>26</sup> Neither Srouji, in his section on this work (*Imīl Ḥabībī*, 196–221), nor, apparently, the studies he refers to, which were not accessible to me, pay attention to this couplet, which stands at the very beginning of the work. This oversight of Srouji's is all the more surprising, since he generally, and rightly, discusses the quotations with which Ḥabībī introduces his books and their different sections. In the case of *Ikhṭayya*, he begins with the warning to the reader under ("*Iḥtirās*"), which Ḥabībī has placed *after* the Mutanabbī quotation.

authorities' investigation to discover who caused it (in the nature of things, the culprit must be an Arab) provide a splendid opportunity for satirising Israeli Jews' attitudes to their Palestinian fellow-citizens, their obsession with security, and the contortions of the judicial system when Arabs are involved.<sup>27</sup> But little by little, behind the present—Israeli reality—there emerges the past—*ayyām* (or *zamān*) *al-ʿArab*.<sup>28</sup> Shadowy figures appear, old place names are recalled, the pre-1948 way of life in Haifa, as adolescents knew it, is evoked. Some of the narrator's nostalgia, for instance for sorts of fruit far tastier than modern varieties, can be ascribed to the passage of time and the accompanying loss of traditional customs and techniques. But his memories of the struggle of the peasants and the urban poor for dignity, justice and survival belong to a specifically Palestinian history. As this part ends, the first named character is introduced, 'Aṭīyya, the illiterate Lebanese bootblack who, after he learned to read and write, put his newly discovered talent for calligraphy at the service of the Communist Party. Though he was forced to return to his country in 1948, some of his finely drawn slogans still adorned the walls of Haifa ten years later.<sup>29</sup>

Haifa of before 1948 comes to life in the second and third parts of the book through the narrator's recollections and his imagined dialogues with his childhood friend, 'Abd al-Karīm, who emigrated to America but has now returned to try to see Ikhtāyya, the lame girl from the neighbourhood whose memory has never left him all through his exile. When he is expelled again for suspicious behaviour during the traffic jam, the narrator weeps for him, just as he

<sup>27</sup> A propos of Ḥabībī's *Al-Waqāʿi' al-Gharība fī Ikhtifā' Saʿīd Abī l-Naḥs al-Mutashāʿil*, Professor Boullata has observed that most Palestinian novels of the last fifty years share a similar structural pattern, a circular movement which starts when disruption occurs in the life of a Palestinian character (Issa J. Boullata, "Symbol and Reality in the Writings of Emile Ḥabībī", *Islamic Culture* 2–3 (1988): 18). *Ikhtāyya* then offers a significant variation on this pattern, since it is the whole of Haifan society which suffers the disruption.

<sup>28</sup> This is an example of Ḥabībī's skill in word-play. "*Ayyām al-ʿArab*" in *Ikhtāyya* refers to the period before the establishment of the state of Israel; it is used interchangeably with "*zamān al-ʿArab*" (Ḥabībī, *Ikhtāyya*, e.g. 23, 38, 55, 56, 90). Together the two expressions evoke "*ayyām zamān*," "days gone by", while the conventional sense of "*Ayyām al-ʿArab*," the pre-Islamic Arabs' Days of Heroism, is also hinted at.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 52. The comparison of the traces of the abandoned encampment with writing is a topos of the *aṭlāl* motif; for examples see James E. Montgomery, "The Deserted Encampment in Ancient Arabic Poetry: a Nexus of Topical Comparisons," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 40 (1995): 284–99.

himself has wept for Ikhtayya;<sup>30</sup> here is an extension of an image pertaining to the *aṭlāl* motif comparable to that in al-Mutanabbī's lines quoted as the prologue. The evocation of a way of life which has vanished and a community which has been dispersed leads up to the stark affirmation, magnificent in its stoicism, which serves as a refrain in the final part: "*Dhahaba lladhīna uḥibbuhum.*"<sup>31</sup>

*Ikhtayya* does not, however, leave the reader with a tear-drenched picture of Old Haifa. The character Ikhtayya represents one facet of Palestinian identity, the other being personified in Sarwa, the dare-devil.<sup>32</sup> While Sarwa through her recklessness has suffered a fatal accident, the maimed but beautiful Ikhtayya turns out to have been living in seclusion in the city uninterrupted.<sup>33</sup> And her presence acquires added importance from the fact that Jews are moving out of the historic quarters of Haifa and Arabs are returning to them, as the narrator notes. In this context recalling the past is not a sterile or self-indulgent exercise but a preparation for the future. Hence the comic and even combative tone of many of the recollections.

The past is not only bound to a geographical location, in Ḥabībī's world, but also to culture, and in particular literature. All of Arabic literature—the heroic endurance of the pre-Islamic poets, the intellectual discipline and curiosity of the geographers and historians, the refined hedonism of the singers of wine, the playfulness of fantastic tales, the subversive expressions of the spirit of liberty in popular prose and poetry, the wisdom accumulated in proverbs—is the abode, *manzil*, of Arab memory. Profound, many-sided, vital, it offers inexhaustible ammunition against attacks from those who contemptuously dismiss the Arab world, "*hādhdhā l-sharq,*"<sup>34</sup> as bewitched and drugged with sleep. With it Ḥabībī defends the Palestinian Arab heritage

<sup>30</sup> "*Abkī 'alayka yā 'Abd al-Karīm, yā lladhī qaḍayta ahlā sinī ḥayātika wa-anta tabkī 'alayhā bukā'an dākhlīyyan*" (Ḥabībī, *Ikhtayya*, 66).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 85, 92, 93. From a poem by 'Amr ibn Ma'dikarib, the second hemistich, which is also quoted on p. 85, being "*wa-baqūtu mīhla l-sayfī fardā*" (Those whom I love have passed on, and I remain as a solitary sword) (cf. Muṭā' al-Ṭarābīshī (ed.), *Shī'r 'Amr ibn Ma'dikarib al-Ḍubayḍī* (Damascus: Maṭbū'āt Majma' al-Lughā al-'Arabiyya, 1394/1974), 66).

<sup>32</sup> This is the interpretation proposed by Hartmut Fähndrich, in his "Nachwort" to Emil Ḥabībī, *Das Tal der Dschinnen*, tr. Hartmut Fähndrich and Edward Badeen (Basel: Lenos Verlag, 1993), 170. In Srouji's view, she plays the part of a mediator in the revelation of Ikhtayya's secret (Srouji, *Iml Ḥabībī*, 215, n. 61).

<sup>33</sup> Hence the final quotation of 'Amr ibn Ma'dikarib's "*dhabaha lladhīna uḥibbuhum*" is followed by "*wa-baqiyat Ikhtayya*" (Ḥabībī, *Ikhtayya*, 93).

<sup>34</sup> Ḥabībī, *Ikhtayya*, 32, 33.

against the onslaughts to which it has been subjected in Israel, using a unique blend of comedy, black humour and satire to transcend the ever-present sense of tragedy. The memory and transmission of literature, so important in Ḥabībī's work, are an act of resistance of Arab identity.

As in the novels of Palestinian writers, the *atlāl* motif in Aḥlām Mustaghānimī's *Dhākirat al-Ḥasad*<sup>35</sup> is intimately linked to a political history. But here it is that of Algeria since the Second World War which is explored. This novel is constructed out of the memories of its hero, Khālīd: his demonstrating as a boy in Constantine in May 1945 and being briefly imprisoned; his joining the FLN and fighting under the command of a respected neighbour, Sī Ṭāhir; his losing an arm and being advised to take up painting as a cure for depression; his growing disillusionment with the cultural policies of the post-independence Algerian government and the absence of freedom of expression; his decision in 1973 to leave for Paris and devote himself to art; his unexpected meeting with Sī Ṭāhir's daughter in 1981; their short but intense love affair; her engagement to an influential politician; Khālīd's return to Constantine to attend her wedding, and his realisation of how difficult life is for his brother Ḥassān and his family, as for so many Algerians; his return to Constantine for good in 1988, to support his brother's family after Ḥassān has been killed in Algiers, caught in the line of fire when the security forces were breaking up a demonstration.

But, as this summary shows, political memories in the book are intertwined with personal ones. To Khālīd, Sī Ṭāhir embodies an ideal of patriotism and heroism, unlike his own self-indulgent father, the cause of so much suffering to his mother. And it was because Khālīd enjoyed Sī Ṭāhir's trust that he went in his stead to register his baby's birth with the Tunisian authorities, while Sī Ṭāhir was fighting the French. Even after his commander's death, Khālīd remained in touch with his family until they returned to Algeria in 1962. One reason why Aḥlām, Sī Ṭāhir's daughter, is attracted to

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<sup>35</sup> Aḥlām Mustaghānimī, *Dhākirat al-Ḥasad* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1993). Aḥlām Mustaghānimī has published short stories and poetry in Arabic and a study in French of Algerian literature: Ahlem Mosteghanemi, *Algérie, Femme et Ecritures* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985). Recently a sequel to *Dhākirat al-Ḥasad* came out: Aḥlām Mustaghānimī, *Fawqā al-Hawāss* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1998).

I am grateful to Professor Maher Jarrar, of the American University of Beirut, for bringing this novel to my attention.

Khālid is because he can tell her about her father, whom she scarcely remembers.

Aḥlām evokes in Khālid many different memories and emotions. She is the daughter of his revered commander, the little girl who climbed on to his lap when he visited her family in Tunis. She is also the girl from Constantine, speaking the dialect of his childhood which he scarcely ever hears in Paris, wearing a traditional gold bracelet, as his mother used to, and decking herself in all the time-honoured finery of Constantine's brides for her wedding. She takes on the features of the city, and even the country, she comes from in Khālid's eyes.<sup>36</sup> At the same time she is the girl half his age who seems for a moment to offer him a chance of profound emotional fulfillment, after years of transitory and unsatisfying relationships. Looking back as he records their love affairs, memories of the distant past but also recollections of their conversations crowd into his mind; however hard he tries, he cannot forget this ultimate passion, which has left him in utter despair, his heart like a "mass grave."<sup>37</sup>

For Aḥlām's passage through his life has been linked to the loss of the people he held most dear, her father, Sī Ṭāhir, his own mother, who died just before he joined the FLN, Ziyād, the Palestinian poet, killed in Beirut in 1982 soon after his last visit to Khālid in Paris where he too fell under Aḥlām's spell, and finally Ḥassān, his only brother and the last friend he had left.

Memory in this novel is not aligned so obviously on the pre-Islamic poetic model as in *Ikhtayya*, but the *aḥlāl*'s echoes are unmistakable. The departures (*raḥīl*) of Aḥlām and Ziyād,<sup>38</sup> the ghosts (*ṭayf*) of Khālid's parents at home, and of his mother taking food to him in prison,<sup>39</sup> the appeal to Aḥlām in her traditional wedding costume to stop and not leave him, an appeal he later makes to the Friends of God (*awliyā'*) in Constantine when Aḥlām has gone her way with her bridegroom and he is left alone to recall the city and its landmarks,<sup>40</sup> all point to the archetypal experience of the arrival at the deserted encampment. Moreover the word *ḥanīn*, longing, runs like a leitmotif through the book, referring not only to yearning for

<sup>36</sup> Mustaghānimī, *Dhākirat al-Jasad*, 13, 119, 141.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 124, 387.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 179, 248.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 288, 323.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 360–61.

a distant person or place but also to Khālid's first painting, a view of Constantine with its bridges crossing the Wādī l-Raml which he did when convalescing after losing his arm. The allusions to the literary heritage become more insistent as the novel progresses, with Khālid's return to the city of his birth and the reawakening of popular traditions for a moment during Aḥlām's wedding reinforcing awareness of the past. And as in a poem, the closing sections bring together all the images introduced gradually while Khālid has been recalling his life. When he arrives at Constantine airport, in mourning for his brother but also for Aḥlām and all his dreams, he has only his memory to declare to the customs officer, together with the pages on which he has noted down what will become the novel. He senses that he may not have much longer to live, but his words, like those of Ziyād in his last poems, cannot be killed. And so, at the very end of the book, the true significance of the act of remembering becomes clear.

*Dhākirat al-Ĵasad* lacks the humour, sometimes savage or sardonic and sometimes mischievous, of *Ikḥṭayya*. And whereas the nameless narrator of Ḥabībī's novel expresses a slight optimism about the future after the discovery that Ikḥṭayya has been living in Haifa all along, Khālid feels as solitary as 'Amr ibn Ma'dīkarib in the line Ḥabībī quotes from him. The one person he might still turn to, Aḥlām's brother Nāṣir, who refused to attend her wedding out of disgust at the corruption of the man she was linking her fate to and the class he represented, remains absent at the end of the book. At best Khālid finds himself dancing in a beautiful wasteland like Zorba the Greek, Aḥlām's hero, carried away by Theodorakis' music. The sombre tone of the book is inspired partly by the fact its hero is mutilated, and one of the senses of the title, *Memory of the Body*, refers to this loss which he cannot forget. Thus this novel develops the *atlāl* motif further, relating it not only to places and loved one but also to the speaker's physical integrity.

These six examples of the *atlāl*'s migration into modern narrative prose could no doubt be supplemented. As they stand, however, they allow some conclusions to be drawn about the modern use of the motif.

In the first place, its function in the modern work varies. In *Bayn al-Atlāl*, the allusion to the deserted dwelling place has no organic connection with the main action, and the use of the motif appears artificial. By contrast, the *atlāl* in *Ḥadīth 'Īsā ibn Hishām*, while they

appear *en passant* and are not essential to the work as a whole, contribute to the exploration of the main subject, the changes taking place in Egyptian society in the nineteenth century. Although *A Bedouin Boyhood* can be read as a series of stories or sketches, it has a thematic unity, and the *atlāl*, which are mentioned in one of the central chapters, add poetic force to the description of a major event; moreover, they are entirely realistic. *Ikhtayya* and *Dhākirat al-Jasad* are explicitly, though not exclusively, constructed on the memory of beloved people and places, and here the *atlāl* are at the heart of the work.

Secondly, the motif is only employed successfully when its poetic force is recognised and taken into account. Calling a novel *Bayn al-Atlāl* and bringing in an appropriate line of poetry at the end of it are not enough. *ʿĀ'id ilā Hayfā* offers a more interesting illustration of the problems which arise when a writer uses such a rich ingredient without due reflection. If the rest of the book had been of the same poetic intensity (although it is difficult to see how Kanafānī could have achieved this, given that he intended the novel to convey a ready-made political message), the descriptions of Šaʿīd and Šafiyya being caught up in the flight from their city and of their reactions on returning after nineteen years would not have jarred. As it is, there is an imbalance between the passages which hark back to the *atlāl* motif and the rest of the work.

Thirdly, the *atlāl* motif, in its modern guise, is no longer quite like its pre-Islamic ancestor. Whereas in the old *qaṣīda* memory of the beloved and the deserted encampment is confined to the introductory section,<sup>41</sup> in modern narratives the act of recalling loved ones in the *atlāl*'s mode does not always occur right at the beginning, and it tends to continue throughout the work, increasing in intensity towards the end. Remembering becomes a pervasive theme, involving ever deeper layers of consciousness. The far greater place occupied by the *atlāl* motif in those modern works which exploit it seems to me to be connected with the role of memory in literature today as a device for structuring experience.

<sup>41</sup> This is not to say that it may not have a bearing on the rest of the poem, and indeed in the ʿAbbāsīd period the *nasīb* is closely related to the *madīḥ*; cf. Stefan Sperl, *Mannerism in Arabic Poetry. A Structural Analysis of Selected Texts* (3rd century A.H./9th century A.D.–5th century A.H./11th century A.D.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 10–11, 19–22.

The deserted encampment and the departed beloved of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda* were a familiar phenomenon in the world of the bedouin. They could thus be evoked economically. In the examples of modern prose works discussed here, the *aṭlāl* motif is used to summon up memories of departed loved ones and literally or figuratively deserted places, but the identity and fate of the people and places and the nature and circumstances of the main character's separation from them vary far more than was ever the case in the *qaṣīda*. The narrator in *Ikhtayya* recalls the community he knew in his youth and its way of life, and in this he resembles Khālid of *Dhākirat al-Jasad*, but Khālid's memories are taken up far more with his beloved Aḥlām and his ideal of a free Algeria than with his childhood. The couple in *ʿĀid ilā Hayfā* are tormented by their abandonment of their son, while in *Ikhtayya* it is those who stayed behind who recall the flight or expulsion of their fellow-countrymen. In a different political context, Aḥlām has chosen to turn her back on Khālid and link her fate to that of the corrupt ruling class in Algeria. As for the places, the character may not be separated from them physically, but he may see them change through alien occupation, as happens to the narrator in *Ikhtayya*. Or he may be driven away from them for ever, a political exile, like Isaac Diq's young narrator. He may also have ambiguous feelings towards them; Khālid feels drawn to Constantine because of its many memories bound up with his childhood and its associations with traditions he values, but when he returns to it from Paris he feels suffocated by the monotony of its life.

Modern works in which the *aṭlāl* motif occurs are treating experiences far more complex than anything the pre-Islamic poet had to convey. Added to this, Arab writers today, like their colleagues all over the world, are profoundly concerned with questions of perception and psychological processes. It is thus not surprising that when a writer chooses to exploit the *aṭlāl* motif, which is synonymous with the recollection of past loves, the process of remembering and the character's efforts to make sense of the past by recreating it in his mind should demand so much more space and effort than was customary in the pre-Islamic poetic tradition.

*Ikhtayya* and *Dhākirat al-Jasad* offer examples of the successful incorporation of a motif at least fifteen centuries old, the *aṭlāl*, into a modern work of fiction, where it plays an essential part. They show that elements of the cultural heritage, sensitively interpreted and

adapted to concord with contemporary experience,<sup>42</sup> still retain their significance. More detailed studies of how today's creators of Arab culture—poets, playwrights, artists or others—exploit the heritage may help to indicate not only which parts of it continue to be relevant, but also in which ways it can best contribute to the continuing development of the culture itself.

And finally, the heritage itself may deserve more careful study than it has received up till now. The preceding analysis has argued that motifs such as the *atlāl*, which go back to the very beginnings of recorded Arabic literature, can perform an archetypal function such as is associated in European or Indian literatures with the heroes and superhuman deeds portrayed in founding epics. These motifs, which dramatize certain profoundly significant emotional moments according to established conventions, become points of reference akin to myths or symbolic figures. And this is not the only case where the Arabic literary tradition has gone its own way. Within a framework of comparative studies of world literature, its specific features need to be recognised for what they are. They should not automatically be dismissed as deviations from a “universal” norm, but rather be examined as “minority” alternatives to “majority” phenomena.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> It is no accident that the two novels which use the *atlāl* to most effect also show the greatest mastery of modern narrative techniques.

<sup>43</sup> Such an approach may also bring out some points of resemblance between literary traditions which are not often compared to each other, but which are similar in some significant respects; for instance, Chinese, like Arabic, lacks a founding epic.

LOVE, DEATH, AND THE GHOST OF AL-KHANSĀ:  
THE MODERN FEMALE POETIC VOICE IN FADWĀ  
ṬŪQĀN'S ELEGIES FOR HER BROTHER IBRĀHĪM

TERRI DEYOUNG

Recognition of the need for any human being to access the power of language in the form of a speaking voice in order to even take the first steps in the creation of sites from which identity and a self can be theorized has been an insistent concern of literary criticism in the last three decades. This has been particularly so in the case of criticism concerned with the role of marginalized groups—like women and colonial (subaltern) subjects—in the production of literary works. What has underlain much of this critical work, though perhaps not itself given sufficient emphasis through being voiced, is the often uneasy admission that literature plays a very ambivalent role in the construction of matrices through which a marginal voice can address (and shape or even eventually resist) the hegemonic power of cultural and political institutions, because literature itself constitutes just such an institution, generally with especially well-shaped bodies of rules for controlling and policing the sorts of discourse which are allowed and not allowed within its field. It is no accident that one of the earliest influential essays on the subject of women and colonialism was entitled by its author, Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”<sup>1</sup> There, she questions the very possibility that discourse, whether its ostensible goal be objective truth (like history) or access to an ideal of adequate subjective representation (like literature) can ever offer to the marginalized a real scaffolding for constructing identities, because discourse, in Foucault’s sense of the

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<sup>1</sup> In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 271–313. Another essay by Spivak, of equal importance in her theorization of women and subaltern discourse is “The Rani of Sirmur,” in *Europe and Its Others*, Vol. 1, ed. Francis Barker et al. (London: University of Essex, 1985), 128–151, where she explores in more detail some of the difficulties encountered in trying to reconstruct the traces of a female subject whose voice was silenced in the archives.

word as a textual apparatus dedicated to epistemic activity,<sup>2</sup> is by its very nature contaminated with a will to power over others that it is simultaneously involved in constantly trying to conceal through the use of discourse strategies that will make the exercise of power seem “natural.” The goal of those who control the discourse, in Spivak’s view, then, is to re-package or “re-present” the marginalized voice in such a way as to contain and limit its subversive power.

The most radical way of containing a marginalized voice, of course, is to silence it entirely, to constitute it as presence without the power to speak. Spivak quite devastatingly details how this can be done, particularly to the female subject caught up in the often violent dislocations of the colonial project, in her depiction of the discursive re-packaging of the practice of *sati*, or suicide by self-immolation, by Hindu women of high rank during the colonial period in the context of a conflict between (male) Indian desire to retain autonomy through control of social practice and British desire to justify their presence as colonizing power by challenging the legitimacy of such traditional practices. The site for this struggle becomes the body of the (female) Indian, who, in the process, seems to lose her ability to speak—and therefore interpret—the significance of her own actions.

Whether or not it is actually true that Indian women have had no opportunity through established discourses to “voice” their own readings of *sati*, Spivak’s argument that the “other’s” observational accounts of the practice—whether by British colonial officer or Indian nationalist—were directed toward portraying that female voice as radically absent should foster a skeptical attitude toward the presuppositions found in portrayals by first-world societies of other cultures they have colonized, including the Arab world, where a case might easily be made that the epistemic violence involved in the perpetuation of the imperial project has left its most vivid and lingering traces.

So it is perhaps not surprising to find that the most common stereotype Westerners carry of the Arab woman is as a sort of void: an immobile figure wreathed in a black veil that conceals nothing but a “black hole” out of which speech cannot emerge just as light can no longer emerge from the singularity surrounding the collaps-

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Confessions of the Flesh,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 196.

ing star. As a teacher, I have not infrequently observed the operation in my students' perceptions of what Miriam Cooke has called "the Arab woman myth." As so she aptly notes, for Americans

[a]lthough all women outside the Euro-American sphere are, in general, perceived to be victims, Arab women are more than victims. They embody silence, the prohibition on language. They live apart, far from places that give space to speech. Their mouths are covered, their voices are strangled.<sup>3</sup>

It is ironic, then, to find—when one actually examines the cultural record—that Arabic literature constitutes an extraordinary rich venue for women's writing, perhaps one of the richest to be found in any literary tradition, at least in the pre-modern period.<sup>4</sup>

Women are particularly well represented in the area of poetry—an important point, because poetry always has been (and to a certain extent, still is) the most prestigious form of literary composition in Arabic. Beginning with the earliest period of Arabic literature, the century before the rise of Islam (known as the pre-Islamic period, or *jāhiliyya*), we find that already a number of women poets had risen to prominence. They were primarily celebrated for their skill in composing elegies for the dead. Most famous of these, certainly, was the late-*jāhiliyya* poetess al-Khansā' of the Banū Sulaym tribe (living just north of Medina), who is best known for her elegies about her brothers Ṣakhr and Mu'awiya. She has always been considered not only an excellent *female* poet, but one of the best poets of the time, period. Her literary judgments were appealed to while she was alive, her verses were extensively anthologized after her death, and she was accorded the unique honor among women poets (and one

<sup>3</sup> Miriam Cooke, "Apple, Nabila, and Ramza: Arab Women's Narrative of Resistance," *To Speak or Be Silent: The Paradox of Disobedience in the Lives of Women*, ed. Lena B. Ross (Wilmette, Illinois: Chiron Publications, 1993), 85.

<sup>4</sup> Periodization of non-Western literatures in Western terms always presents a difficulty. Arabic literature has what may be termed a "classical period" extending from the sixth century C.E. to the thirteenth century C.E. This is often referred to as "medieval" Arabic literature because it corresponds roughly to the medieval period of Western literature, and there are certain common features shared by the two traditions that can make this term useful when employed in a comparative context. There, however, the resemblances end. Arabic literature is conventionally represented as having undergone a decline following its "classical" period that was only reversed at the beginning of the nineteenth century by a "Renaissance" (*nahḍa*) that leads directly to a foreshortened romantic and then a modernist period, the former beginning at start of the twentieth century and the latter following World War II. Examples of prominent women writers can be found in all these periods.

given to relatively few male poets) of having her entire *oeuvre* brought together in a *ḍiẓwān*, or independent collection of poetry.<sup>5</sup>

After the rise of Islam, women continued to produce elegies, and some also became known for poetry that expressed an acute nostalgia for the life of the desert in the increasingly urbanized Islamic environment.<sup>6</sup> The most important new development for women's poetry in the Islamic period, however, was a turn toward the employment of highly trained singing girls (technically slaves) as entertainers in courtly circles. These women not only put the poems of others to music, but also composed verses of their own, for which they could be handsomely rewarded by their employers/masters. The most important anthology of the 'Abbasid period, when Arab Islamic civilization was at its height, the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Book of Songs) contains a number of chapters on these female entertainers.

It is important to emphasize that these women, even though they may have been slaves, are depicted as being highly educated. In fact, all women poets, with the possible exception of those from the early *jāhiliyya*, must have had access to at least a certain level of education, because classical Arabic (*fushā*), the language in which poetry was composed, was a learned language that differed in very significant ways from the spoken vernaculars of everyday life. Thus, a record of women's composition in Arabic such as we possess from this period, indicates not only that women had access to a voice, but to a learned voice which guaranteed them a certain level of cultural

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Qutayba, the ninth-century literary figure and anthologist, includes a lengthy discussion of her life and poetry in his *Kitāb al-Shi'r wa l-Shu'arā'*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1966), 343–347, as does Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī in his tenth-century collection, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, Vol. 15, ed. Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī (Cairo: Dār al-Sha'b, 1970), 5360–5390. Her *ḍiẓwān* was collected in the medieval period (the oldest dated manuscript we have was completed in 620 A.H./1223 C.E. and contains fifty-five poems, though more are to be found in other manuscripts) and was first published by Louis Cheikho in 1897 with a modern edition produced by Ibrāhīm 'Awaḍayn in 1985. More extensive references to the medieval and modern literary critical opinions of her work may be found in *Ḍiẓwān al-Khansā'*, ed. Ibrāhīm 'Awaḍayn (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'āda, 1985), 123–130 and 160–170.

<sup>6</sup> The most famous of these was Maysūn, wife of the caliph Mu'āwiya. For an article discussing the various translations of the poem and speculations about its historicity, see J.W. Redhouse, "Observations on the various Texts and Translations of the so-called 'Song of Meysun'," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, n.s. 18 (1886): 268–294. There are several other interesting examples of this sort of poem in Theodore Noldeke's *Delectus Veterum Carminum Arabicorum*. (Berlin: Reuther and Reichord, 1933), 25.

respect that not many men were able to command, as literacy, even in the cities, was probably at a level of less than five percent of the population.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, women's role in literary production was bounded by the convention that elegy was the only really "proper" genre in which women could compose. Genres like panegyric, wine poetry and even love poetry were largely closed to them, although such boundaries could occasionally be tested or crossed, especially by singing girls, who did not have to concern themselves so much with questions of propriety, reputation or family honor. The notion, however, that elegy was a literary ghetto to which women were condemned because they were more "sensitive" than men and thus better qualified to express the extreme emotions engendered by loss of a loved one<sup>8</sup> should be mitigated by the fact that male Arab poets, including some of the most famous, composed elegies quite frequently and the elegies of great pre-Islamic poets, like Mutammim Ibn Nuwayra among the men and al-Khansā' among the women can only be subtly differentiated from one another on a supposed gender basis. In short, they exhibit more shared features than dissimilarities. And, although modern literary criticism—whether in the West or the Arab world—has tended to devalue elegy as an effective poetic genre,<sup>9</sup> something of the "contingency of value"<sup>10</sup> can be seen in the fact that women poets in the West were generally discouraged from

<sup>7</sup> It is obviously difficult to estimate exact literacy levels at this time, given the lack of statistical records. But 5%, more or less, was the average literacy level in the Arab world in the nineteenth century under the Ottoman Empire, and it is difficult to imagine that levels would have been markedly higher in the medieval period.

<sup>8</sup> This stereotype of women's writing is not uncommon in modern Arabic literary criticism. See, for example, 'Abd al-Laṭīf Sharāra, "Qara'tu al-'Adad al-Māḍī min 'Al-Ādāb,'" *Al-Ādāb* 2:7 (July 1954): 63 and Rajā' al-Naqqāsh (quoting Anwar al-Ma'adāwī), *Ṣafahāt Majhūla fī al-Ādab al-'Arabī al-Mu'āṣir* (Beirut: Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-al-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 1976), 250. The possibility that this derives from classical literary criticism is discussed in Bushrā Muḥammad al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Rithā' fī al-Shi'r al-Jāhili wa-Ṣadr al-Islām* (Baghdad: Mudiriyyat Maṭba'at al-Idāra al-Maḥaliyya, 1977), 126–127.

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Sacks discussion of the modern depersonalization of death in the face of advancing medical technology and the conduct of mass warfare on a scale hitherto unknown, and how it has affected the literary representation of death and mourning in *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 299.

<sup>10</sup> These speculations draw on some of the work done by Barbara Herrnstein Smith on the formation of literary judgments and how they are used to create generic standards in *Contingencies of Value* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), especially 54–71.

producing elegies because use of the elegy form, particularly imitations of the classic pastoral eclogue, was frequently seen as announcing a young poet's rite of passage into literary adulthood: his first mature work. Examples of this practice taken from English literature would include Spenser's poems on Sir Philip Sidney, Milton's "Lycidas" and Tennyson's "In Memoriam."<sup>11</sup> Thus, the limitation of women's writing in Arabic to elegy can be seen as a move that did not necessarily silence the marginalized female voice in Arabic writing. It does, however, powerfully demonstrate the hegemonic role of literature as a social institution, involved as it was in channeling that voice in certain directions and away from others, like love poetry, that were seen as potentially more dangerous to the cohesion of the social fabric. This channeling, moreover, was accomplished very early in the history of Arabic literature, by the end of the *jāhiliyya* period, through, ironically, the canonization of two women elegists, al-Khansā' and Laylā al-Akhyiliyya, as the best women poets and therefore the models most worthy of imitation.

The power of such defining gestures and the perception of them as radically limiting for Arab women's voices has, perhaps not surprisingly, only grown stronger with the passage of time and the advent of the pursuit of "modernity" (and especially the dedication to imitating Western practice as an avenue to achieving "modernity") as a factor in the development of Arabic *belles lettres*. Thus, when a young feminist chooses to critique the lack of activism among Arab women during the 1991 Gulf War, she frames her argument in the form of a protest against the hegemonic power of al-Khansā' as a discursive and practical model for Arab women:

Is the Khansā' of the past also the Khansā' of the present?

Have the roles of Arab women changed since the time of Khansā'?  
Or do they still come and go in her place? Shouting jubilation when one of their children suffers martyrdom, ululating with their hearts black as night. Tearing their garments in their sorrow over the dear departed, and dancing with joy when they give birth to male heroes.

Is she the geography that mothers heroes, and is that enough?

Is it enough for her to live her life in the fantasy of being married to a hero, or the fantasy of giving birth to a hero, or, with even less assurance, to be the daughter of a hero?

Is it enough for her to attach herself to heroism thus?

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<sup>11</sup> Sacks, 14–16.

When the war broke out, . . . the Khansā' of the past became identical with the Khansā' of the present, despite the greater clamor over freedom, equality and liberty. The Arab woman did not find herself moving out from the threshold of light into the light [itself], rather, she appeared to us as part of a Greek chorus crowned in black, without any discernible features, her voice and her opinions circumscribed, unable to say how the war might benefit her and how it might harm her. And she was the one most concerned with its catastrophes and results, the one most likely to harvest its woes.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly these paragraphs exhibit a tendency to project onto Khansā' and the past of women's writing in Arabic some of the more damaging features of the detemporalized Western stereotype of the "Arab woman," thus locating and containing its danger in a safely distant location. More importantly for our purposes here, however, they powerfully and succinctly express a very widespread modern-day perception of al-Khansā' as a negative model whose practice is to be avoided. Whether or not her work actually deserves to be perceived in this way is another question, but none can deny that such a perception is present and operative in much modern intellectual discourse in the Arab world.

All modern Arab women writers would have found it difficult to avoid confronting at one time or another the ambivalent legacy of al-Khansā'. But one, in particular, has been challenged by the paradigm because of certain incidental similarities between her own life history and the life of al-Khansā'. This is the contemporary Palestinian poet Fadwā Ṭūqān.

Fadwā Ṭūqān was born and lives in Nablus, probably the largest among the towns now controlled by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank territories. Until 1967; this area was administered by Jordan, in the wake of the dismemberment of the former Palestine Mandate following the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948. After the 1967 war between Israel and the surrounding Arab countries, it was occupied by the Israelis and fell under their direct military authority for nearly 30 years. Thus, Fadwā Ṭūqān's poetry, which she has been composing for more than 50 years, has become central to the task of building a cohesive and independent Palestinian identity, for her work records nearly all facets of the Palestinian experience: from the perspective of someone who can remember what life was like before

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<sup>12</sup> Nuhā Samāra, "Lā li-Khansā' al-Māḍi!" *Al-Shāhid* 68 (April 1991): 65.

the discontinuity of 1948, to someone who has experienced both the sense of alienation implicit in being completely cut off from a large chunk of one's homeland and family (before 1967) and the awareness of the thousand daily compromises and negotiations between power and resistance that are part of living under occupation.

Fadwā Ṭūqān was one of the first poets to find a voice following 1948 that seemed to her fellow Palestinians and to other Arabs to express the authenticity of their own experience vis-a-vis the loss of Palestine and she has continued to receive an authorization, through her long popularity, to "re-present" them and speak for them. But she has also been very much aware, throughout her career, of her status as a woman poet and the limitations this has imposed on her voice. More than in the texts of the poems themselves, however, this awareness is visible in her autobiography *Rihla Jabaliyya, Rihla Sa'ba (A Mountainous Journey)*,<sup>13</sup> which, like many of Nawwāl Sa'dāwī's ostensibly autobiographical novels, registers a strong protest against what the author sees as the elisions which the female voice is subject in the Arab world in the name of strengthening the family and enhancing social cohesion.

*A Mountainous Journey* tells us that the author was born around the end of the first World War into a large, aristocratic family that was considered conservative even in the conservative town of Nablus. Her parents certainly do not seem to have conveyed much affection in their dealings with her. She was the seventh of ten children, and Fadwā's mother made it clear that she had been an unwanted child by telling her daughter at a young and impressionable age that she had tried to induce an abortion when she learned she was pregnant with her.<sup>14</sup> Her father was distant and cold in his relations with his daughter, while her female relatives were carping and critical.

For Fadwā, what rescued her from this life of misery was the arrival of her older brother Ibrāhīm back on the scene fresh from having earned his B.A. at the American University in Beirut. This occurred in 1929, when Fadwā was on the edge of adolescence, a time when choices would have to be made about her future: should she continue with her schooling, or stay at home and prepare for

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<sup>13</sup> Published in Acre by Dār al-Aswār and in 'Ammān by Dār al-Shurūq, 1985. The translation into English was done by Olive Kenny and Naomi Shihab Nye and was published in London by the Women's Press in 1990.

<sup>14</sup> *Journey*, 12-15.

marriage, helping her mother run the large and busy household? The issue was brought to a head when Fadwā was found to have accepted the present of a flower from a sixteen-year-old boy who had fallen in love with her. She was taken out of school and told that she could not leave the family house unaccompanied.

Ibrāhīm, though he could not reverse the decision to keep his sister at home, began to tutor her personally and to teach her how to write poetry (he was by this time already a published and popular poet himself). According to Fadwā, this opened up a new world to her and began to restore her damaged self-esteem. Ibrāhīm even made a special effort to introduce her to well-known verses in the Arabic literary tradition that had been composed by women, "so," as he said to her, "you could see how Arab women write beautiful poems."<sup>15</sup>

Ten years later, she would go to live with Ibrāhīm and his wife in Jerusalem, and this, she felt, was a crucial period in cementing her sense of self-confidence as an independent person. Ibrāhīm was then working as director of the Arabic programs at the Palestine Broadcasting Service,<sup>16</sup> a post from which he would be dismissed in October 1940 for the allegedly anti-Semitic and anti-colonial slant he gave to some of the programs he broadcast, especially one about classical Arabic literature, dealing with the relationship between the pre-Islamic poet Imru' al-Qays and his contemporary, the Jewish Arab poet al-Samaw'al.<sup>17</sup> Following his dismissal, Ibrāhīm took up a teaching position in Iraq and Fadwā had to return home to Nablus. But the Iraqi climate was difficult for someone of Ibrāhīm's uncertain health to adjust to, and in mid-April 1941 he caught typhoid fever. By the end of that month, he was dead.<sup>18</sup>

So, like al-Khansā', Fadwā Ṭūqān had prematurely lost a brother who had befriended her and shown special kindness to her. In al-Khansā's case, her brother Ṣakhr had rescued his sister's entire family from destitution. Her second husband, Mirdas ibn Abī 'Āmir al-Sulamī,<sup>19</sup> was as she put it "a chieftain much given to giving,"

<sup>15</sup> *Journey*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> *Journey*, 100; See also 'Umar Farrūkh, *Shā'irān Mu'āṣirān: Ibrāhīm Ṭūqān wa-Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī* (Beirut: Al-Maktaba al-'Ilmiyya, 1954), 48–49.

<sup>17</sup> *Journey*, 100; Farrūkh, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Farrūkh, 60–62.

<sup>19</sup> There are different versions of al-Khansā's marriage history. Ibrāhīm 'Awaḍayn, in his edition of al-Khansā's *Dīwān* attempts to sort out these versions and con-

and his wealth was exhausted soon after their marriage. She suggested that they ask her brother for help, and when they went to Şakhr, he promptly divided his wealth into two parts and gave his sister "the better portion." This caused his wife to rebuke him for not thinking of her needs, and set the stage for her refusal to care for him in his final illness, when he lay dying from battle wounds suffered in an abortive raid on another tribe.

Al-Khansā'’s sisterly devotion to her brother is thus contrasted in the stories about her life with the wife’s disloyalty, and stress on loyalty is indeed a theme her poetry often takes up. In fact, such brother-sister devotion is a motif that occurs much more frequently in Arabic literature than in any Western counterpart. This may reflect the fact that the sort of honor code common throughout the Mediterranean basin, which depends on a woman’s absolute chastity before marriage and absolute faithfulness to her husband once she is married, is policed by the woman’s male relatives (her father and brothers, uncles and cousins) rather than by her husband, for her relatives are the ones who would lose face were she to violate the code. Thus, a woman’s brother becomes more than just a fellow family member with whom she shares childhood experiences. His opinion of her trustworthiness may have life or death consequences for her long after adulthood is reached. And it should be noted, conversely, that her brother’s good opinion may have a directly beneficial effect on the course of a woman’s life. Not only have we seen this in the specific stories of al-Khansā’ and Fadwā Ṭūqān, where one receives an education and the other is saved from financial ruin by a brother, but in cases where a woman has been mistreated by her husband, or she can convince her brother (if her father is no longer in the picture) that she has been unjustly accused of violating the honor code, he will be obligated to come to her defense.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, one of the most dramatic tales of brother-sister loyalty is the story of Khawla bint Azwar from the early Islamic period. There Khawla takes up arms and goes after her brother when he disappears on a raid in enemy territory and braves great danger, in the process

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clides that she had two marriages. The first was to ‘Abd al-‘Uzza, and the second to Mirdas, who was the father of her three sons.

<sup>20</sup> An interesting modern illustration of this principle in action can be found in Rosemary Sayigh’s account of a husband-wife confrontation in "Recording 'Real Life' in Wadi Zeineh," *Middle East Report*, (November-December 1991): 24–25.

besting a number of formidable warriors, in order to bring him back alive and safe. It is as though in the literary representation the parameters of the real-life relationship are reversed in order to emphasize even more strongly the mutuality of the sibling bond in its ideal form.<sup>21</sup>

To return to the valences that overdetermine the connection specifically between the poetry of Fadwā Ṭūqān and al-Khansā', however, it should be noted that each woman lost a second brother in much the same tragic and premature way as she had lost her other brother. Before she lost Ṣakhr, al-Khansā' had watched her other brother, Mu'āwiya, die of wounds received on one of the tribe's constant internecine raids. And Fadwā Ṭūqān would lose another brother, Nimr—who had partly come to replace Ibrāhīm in her affections—in a plane crash shortly before the onset of the 1967 war. Although Fadwā's second loss, with its seeming confirmation of the inexorable working out of the pattern of al-Khansā's experience in her own life, would not occur until many years after Ibrāhīm's death, this did not prevent others from pointing out the similarities long before.<sup>22</sup>

And, in fact, Fadwā did not necessarily seek to distance herself from such comparison. Her first *diwān*, or collection of poems, is dedicated to Ibrāhīm, and it contains two poems that are clearly meant to be read as elegies for her brother. The first, "Alā al-Qabr" (On the Grave) is dedicated to "the spirit of Ibrāhīm," and the second one, "Ḥayā(t)" (A Life), mentions the death of her brother and her father in the text. Both of these poems can be read as preliminary efforts leading up to a third poem, much longer and more complex in its execution, that was not published until the appearance of Ṭūqān's second *diwān* in 1956: "Ḥulm al-Dhikrā" (Dream of Remembrance). This poem deals with her poetic as well personal ambivalences about being the inheritor of her brother's legacy. All these poems are products of the first phase of her mature poetic career, in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Yet, on the other hand, a reading of the poems themselves suggests that Fadwā was not particularly anxious to associate herself with the

<sup>21</sup> For a synoptic account of Khawla's story, see Imilī Naṣrallāh, *Nisā' Rā'idāt* (Beirut: Mu'assasat Nawfal, 1986), 97–102.

<sup>22</sup> Thus, one of the earliest books about Fadwā's poetry devotes a whole chapter to a comparison between her work and al-Khansā's. See Shākīr al-Nābulī, *Fadwā Ṭūqān* (Cairo: Al-Dār al-Qawmiyya li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-al-Nashr, 1966), 47–54. The comparison is also used in 'Abd al-Muḥsin Ṭāhā Badr, *Ḥawla al-Adīb wa-al-Wāqi'* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1978), 87.

legacy of al-Khansā' either. She makes no particular allusions to any of Khansā's famous poems, either in terms of vocabulary or trope or metaphor. Her poems all take stances toward the fact of death and the need to mourn for the departed quite different from those of her illustrious predecessor. It is also interesting to note that none of these poems seem to seek overtly to identify themselves with elegies by Ibrāhīm, although Ibrāhīm was himself quite renowned for some of the elegies he composed, like the poem "Red Tuesday," recently translated and analyzed by Professor Boullata, or his memorial verses for King Fayṣal of Iraq, commemorating his leading role in promoting the cause of Arab nationalism during and after World War I. That poem begins:

Pay your last respects to the night and rise to welcome  
the rising of the sun behind [Mt.] Carmel,  
And lower your gaze, for your sacred hearths are about to be enveloped,  
O Palestine, with the radiance of Fayṣal.<sup>23</sup>

As is evident here, Ibrāhīm's elegies tend to turn toward the audience the impersonal face of a nation in grief and mourning, for whom the poet acts as spokesman and normative voice.

Al-Khansā's poems, too—despite their reputation for expressing the epitome of sincere grief—are impersonal, though in a different way. She rarely attributes the emotions she describes directly to herself, or analyzes them from an internalized perspective, but mediates them through attribution to other objects or living things to be found in her environment. Typical is the opening of what is probably her most quoted work, the *rā'iyya* (poem rhyming in the letter "r") elegizing her brother Ṣakhr:

- 1) What has excited your sorrow to the point of unsteadiness: is there  
a mote in your eye?  
or has it overflowed with tears? or has the dwelling place lost its  
inhabitants?
- 2) It is as though my eye, on account of remembering him, when it  
moves up and down, is a river  
that overflows, the excess pouring down the two cheeks.

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<sup>23</sup> King Fayṣal had died unexpectedly in Switzerland, and the body was brought back in state by boat to Iraq. The return route had the boat dock in the port of Haifa, where this funeral oration was delivered. *Dīwān Ibrāhīm Ṭūqān* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1966), 213–214.

- 3) It (= the eye) is weeping for Ṣakhr, it is the one whose tears never dry up, and it has lost its ability to control  
itself because of the intensity of its emotion and veils stand before him, composed of new soil.<sup>24</sup>

Here, the speaker begins the poem by addressing herself in the second person, calling attention to the action of her eye as though it belonged to someone else, as if she had no clue as to why it might be producing tears. Even when, in the second line, she acknowledges that it is her own eye she is speaking of, her representation of it is as an externalized object that acts on its own, which she has no ability to control. The fact that this opening of elegy with an address to the speaker's eye seems to be quite conventional<sup>25</sup> in no way vitiates the cogency of my point; rather it enhances it. It is as though the initiatory gesture of the "work of mourning" described in medieval Arabic elegies is required to be a distancing device, one that is necessary to contain and control the raw emotion of grief and loss. This sense of loss is thus taken by the author and audience as a given which precedes the poetic activity. The poem instead is focused on the symbolic process by which the emotion is channeled and directed toward the goal of finding consolation so that the mourner/author can continue with life.

Another way that al-Khansā' and other elegists from the Arab tradition contain and control the process of mourning is by projecting their grief onto one of the animal inhabitants of their world. Most often this is done with a camel, where the animal's grief and pain obliquely express the feelings of the elegist. Again, a famous example of this is found in the *rā'iyya* for Ṣakhr:

- 11) No mother bereft of a small child, walking in circles round the skin of a young camel stuffed with straw<sup>26</sup>  
with two [cries of] yearning: a low toned one and a high toned one,

<sup>24</sup> *Dīwān al-Khansā'*, 298.

<sup>25</sup> *Dīwān al-Khansā'*, 140–147. It should be noted that such apostrophes are not "gendered" female in medieval Arabic poetry, but may be found in men's poems as well. For examples of, and brief discussions about, the same phenomenon in popular modern verse (where there does seem to be a female valencing), see Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), *passim*, but especially 181.

<sup>26</sup> The commentary in the *dīwān* tells us that not infrequently the newborn camel foal would be killed, so that all the mother's milk could be used by the owner's

- 12) Passing, grazing freely among abundant herbage, until she is reminded  
 then she hesitates, moving forward and then backward,
- 13) Never becoming plump over time (*al-dahr*) in a land, even though  
 it has received the spring rains,  
 rather she remains an intensity of yearning and the prolonging  
 of her yearning cry for her young,
- 14) Could feel more pain emotionally than I on the day we parted  
 from Şakhr—and time has sweet moments and bitter ones.

Here, the image of an agitated female camel becomes the surrogate for the elegist herself in a drama that mimes in miniature the stages of grieving and the ritualistic preoccupations of a human mourner. At first the mother camel is inconsolable, not to be put off by the fake camel foal. Then, as she follows a natural process of mourning, where other preoccupations, especially those associated with the survivor's continued existence, begin to disrupt her unwavering, and potentially self-destructive, attachment to the departed. But in the camel's case (and thus, we are led to believe, in al-Khansā's) this detachment from the object of fixation is itself short-circuited, and she becomes, or so the language of the poem would have it, the cry of yearning for the lost foal. This cry is no longer expressive of her "state of mind"—and therefore subject to the same power of temporal change that all internal emotion conditions are subject to—it is her, the two are identical, and thus she moves out of the reach of temporality and no longer responds to its imperatives.

In this process of representing mourning in all its details, many of the boundaries between human and animal are dissolved by the author, a characteristic gesture in much pre-Islamic poetry, which invests in its "animal tableaux" much of the same literary energy we find carried by allegorical episodes in the medieval European tradition. It is difficult, however, to call these "animal tableaux" allegories proper, because they generally contain no textual cues that would force us to read the incidents on anything other than the literal level. They simply parallel the interactions of the human characters in the poems or contrast with them.

This particular "animal tableau" as utilized by al-Khansā', how-

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family. When this was done, a deception was used to make her continue to produce milk. Her foal's skin would be stuffed with straw and placed before her in order to fool her into thinking it was still alive.

ever, does illustrate more pointedly the subtle changes a female voice can introduce in rendering its own version of a predominantly male-oriented discourse. Most lengthy pre-Islamic poems (*qaṣīdas*) fall into a tripartite structure that relies for its scaffolding on an implicit story that can be, roughly, rendered as follows. The poet encounters some object or place (an abandoned campsite in the desert is the favored topos for this) that causes him to remember an old love affair with a woman who left him, either willingly or unwillingly. He pauses for awhile in an obsessive reminiscence of that old attachment, but shakes himself free of it by embarking on a journey across the desert. In the course of this journey, he describes (and the description often displaces the record of the journey itself) some animal, usually his own mount (either a camel or horse), but it can also be a wild beast he encounters along the way. The faithfulness and loyalty of the animal(s) depicted in these tableaux implicitly contrasts with the unfaithfulness and inconstancy of the poet's beloved. In the final section of the poem, the poet arrives at a patron's encampment, or some other event occurs which has the effect of displacing the beloved's ill-treatment of him from the poet's mind.

Although elegies do not follow this tripartite structure, to the extent that any mention of a beloved at the beginning was considered a stylistic blemish by rhetoricians and (even more significantly) rarely occurs, the general emotional progression from obsession to consolation duplicates the emotional pattern of the standard pre-Islamic *qaṣīda*. So it is very interesting to see al-Khansā' centering her poem on an "animal tableau" that presents the (female) camel in great detail and identifies her quite explicitly with the (female) poet's speaking voice. It is as though she was inverting, by seizing the opportunity to speak, the traditional male prejudice that contrasted the loyalty of the animal with the disloyalty of the (beloved) woman, and strongly asserting the right of women to be accounted equal to the male in their capacity for fidelity.<sup>27</sup>

Fadwā Ṭūqān, I would argue, tries in her elegies to insert a new voice into the work of mourning, one that tries equally to distance itself from the potentially overpowering models of her two most cogent predecessors: al-Khansā' and her own brother Ibrāhīm. She does

<sup>27</sup> Male (poet's) strong assertions of their fidelity are not infrequently features of poems that include animal tableaux, though they may occur in the *nasīb* itself rather than the *raḥīl*.

this most notably at first glance by eschewing distancing and choosing to speak of her emotions in a very direct and unmediated way:

O grave, how often here has my soul hovered  
 distracted around you like a bird with its throat slit?  
 have you not seen it, its wounds all bloody?  
 Leaping up in the intensity of its trouble and despair,  
 Overwhelmed by the yearning it has suffered.<sup>28</sup>

Here, the apostrophe to the eye remains deactivated. Its place is instead taken by a much more contextually motivated apostrophe to her brother's grave. In other words, she remains an integrated subject, whole and undivided, addressing another undivided subjectivity, whose personification is rendered "natural" by the fact that it contains and subsumes her brother's body.

Even more of a gesture away from emotional distancing, however, is the object/animal to which the speaker chooses to compare herself: the bird with its throat slit (*tayr dhabāh*) in line 1. Birds appearing as symbolically invested figures are not uncommon in later Arabic poetry, especially mystical poetry, where they instance the human soul, especially in its spiritual aspiration for the divine.<sup>29</sup> This draws upon their use as proxies for the lovelorn poet in Islamic love poetry, especially the dove whose cooing is reminiscent of the lover's weeping. They also emerge relatively frequently in war poems from pre-Islamic times on, where they are typically invoked as harbingers of death, hovering restlessly over the battlefield.<sup>30</sup> In the same vein of birds being omens of ill-fortune, the cawing of the "raven of separation" (*ghurāb al-bayn*) presages the enforced separation of the lovers in the first section (*nasīb*) of early *qaṣīdas*. But birds are rarely invoked as part of the landscape of the pre-Islamic elegy proper in Arabic, and certainly not as a locus for the mourner's emotions. What the appeal to the bird image does, then, would seem most forcefully to begin the creation of linkages in the mind of the culturally cognizant

<sup>28</sup> Fadwā Ṭūqān, *Dīwān* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1987), 121.

<sup>29</sup> See Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 306–307 where she gives perhaps the best capsule description of the use of birds in Islamic mystical poetry.

<sup>30</sup> One might also include here the belief, quite widespread in even the Islamic period on the folk level, that the soul of a murdered person whose blood has not been avenged would hover about the deceased's grave in the form of a bird, usually an owl. For a useful introduction to the subject in English, see T. Emil Homerin, "Echoes of a Thirsty Owl: Death and Afterlife in Pre-Islamic Arabic Poetry," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 44, 2 (1985): 165–184.

reader between love—whether divine or human—and death, since one of the points at which their literary treatments might be seen to converge is in the employment of such avian imagery. Thus this whole first stanza, by conflating desire for a still present beloved and desire the permanently absent dead person, locates itself in the terrain of the “prequel” to a traditional Arabic elegy: the stage of unprocessed emotive expression before beginning the work of finding consolation.

The adjective used to describe the bird, *dhabīh*,<sup>31</sup> does re-situate us more securely in the world of the traditional Arabic elegy, because it calls to mind the well-known *jāhiliyya* practice of tethering one of the deceased’s camels to his grave and leaving it there to perish of hunger and thirst. According to later accounts, the pre-Islamic Arabs believed that this sacrificed camel would be used by the dead man to ride upon in the afterlife, and the practice continues to be evoked—at least literarily—even after the coming of Islam. Significantly, however, this is not how al-Khansā’ presents the camel (or any other animal figure) in her best known poems. So it would seem to be an image whose presence in Fadwā’s poem seems determined by a double imperative: 1) to bring herself into a position of closer identification with the deceased as beloved (the bird/poetess is pictured as dead herself, the bird figure as desiring what it cannot attain—either its own longing for a beloved, either human or divine, or its more metonymic association with the separation of human lovers in the *nasīb*, thus marking others’ desire rather than its own); and 2) to simultaneously distance herself poetically and as a literary inheritor from precursors, most especially (though not necessarily limited to) her brother.

This last point, of a certain covert combativeness to her brother’s work (as well as al-Khansā’'s) surfacing at the inception of the poem and focusing on the bird image, may well have been in this case particularly occasioned by a certain rather anomalous poem composed by Ibrāhīm in the early 1930s called “*Maṣraʿ al-Bulbul*” (Fall of the Nightingale).<sup>32</sup> This poem is tacked on at the end of the elegy

<sup>31</sup> Literally, “split open at the throat,” and since this is the proper mode of conducting a religious sacrifice, the word comes to mean “sacrificed, slaughtered,” with unmistakable religious overtones.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the circumstances surrounding the poem’s composition, see Farrūkh, 96–97.

section of Ibrāhīm's *dīwān*, even though its generic allegiance would seem to be with allegorical fable rather than elegy. This poem, as the author himself tells us in a short epigraph placed at the beginning of the first page, concerns:

... real life in the big city when a youth coming from a small town or a simple village encounters its hazards. This hectic life sinks its claws into the youth through its adornments and the many varieties of amusements and frivolities. It attracts him and he finds himself lying within its embrace and he follows its lead, so that it carries him into all manner of error and mistakes.

... As for the nightingale in this story, it symbolizes the deluded youth, and as for the rose, it symbolizes the female who sells pleasure and frivolity. The garden is a symbol of the tavern or the pleasure house.<sup>33</sup>

Here the terms of the mystical convention based on a narrative of the soul/bird hopelessly in love with the rose (divine beloved) are reinscribed in a new master narrative with a decidedly misogynist tone, where the divine beloved is reinterpreted as the symbol of (female) worldly corruption, tempting the simple, pure (and now male) soul of the youth.<sup>34</sup>

At the end of the poem, the rose (to whom the nightingale has just sung a song declaring the depth of his love and the purity of

<sup>33</sup> Ibrāhīm Ṭūqān, *Dīwān*, 229–230.

<sup>34</sup> Despite the seemingly Arab-Islamic matrix of the poem, according to Farrūkh (96) it had a Western, not an Islamic, precursor. He says that Ibrāhīm began his poem in 1932, following the model of Oscar Wilde's "The Nightingale and the Rose," which had recently been translated into Arabic by 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Yāsīn. Interestingly, this work by Wilde is a short story, not a poem (as Farrūkh has it), and the narrative is quite different from what Ibrāhīm gives us. In Wilde's tale, the (female) falls in love with a young man who longs, in his turn, for a girl who will only kiss him "when he brings her a red rose." He can find none in the town where he lives and therefore he despairs of ever attaining the girl. The nightingale overhears him talking about his problem, and determines on her own to fulfil the young man's wish. She goes about the gardens of the town until she finds a white rose who tells her that it will turn red if it is fed for one night on the heart's blood of a living thing. The nightingale volunteers herself and offers herself willingly to the rose's thorns, which bleed her all night long until she dies. The rose's petals, however, have turned a deep, dark shade of crimson. But, when the young man offers the flower to his beloved, she casts it aside, telling him that it is not nearly so beautiful or desirable as the jewels she has been promised by her rich lover if she will consent to be his wife. Thus, the death of the nightingale is a willed, conscious sacrifice for an ideal, the rose is not to blame and the tragedy is one of thoughtlessness and indifference, not malice. See Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works*, ed. Vyvyan Beresford (London: Collins, 1966), 292–296.

his desire for her beauty, while his beak gently caresses her velvet red petals) now reveals herself for what she really is:

The bird embraced her, covering her with his wings,  
 seeking her mouth with his parted lips.  
 He had scarcely enjoyed a breath of love's intoxicating fragrance  
 before a thorn thrust forward with burning tip,  
 She introduced it into a heart that, if it had fluttered  
 its wings once, beating with love, it was love for her,  
 She sipped innocent blood and as her cheeks  
 reflected it, glowing bright,  
 The bird looked with a glance which his spirit took in  
 with a gasp of realization:  
 [Such] a rose may dazzle your eyes, but too much smelling  
 has made it lose its fragrance.<sup>35</sup>

The combination of the inclusion of this poem in the category of elegies (even though it does not, obviously, mourn the passing of a recognizable public figure, as all of the other poems in this section of *dīwān* do) with its oddly misogynistic tone, so uncharacteristic of the way Ibrāhīm is portrayed to us by those who knew him (who seem to have seen him as an enlightened husband, brother and colleague who championed a greater public role for women in society) should give the reader some pause as s/he encounters such a similar allusion at the beginning of what must have been one of Fadwā's earliest expressions of mourning for her brother. Was she covertly alluding to this poem and, by her own equation of her speaking voice with the fallen bird, contesting her brother's limiting and exclusionary re-reading of a common Sufi fable? In this, was she acting much as al-Khansā' seems to have done (though in different topological register) when she appropriated the figure of the faithful (female) camel as a vehicle for her own human female (and therefore associated with the faithless beloved) speaking voice?

The next few stanzas of the poem do not seem to offer us much in the way of real answers to these questions. They proceed rather conventionally with an exposition of the classic stages of "the work of mourning" categorized in modern psychology, categories following the groundwork laid by Freud in his classic essay on "Mourning and Melancholia." As Freud stresses there, the ultimate goal of what he calls "healthy mourning" is the detachment of the bereaved from

<sup>35</sup> Ibrāhīm Ṭūqān, *Dīwān*, 238.

his or her desire for the presence of the deceased, the beloved object, ending in acceptance of the fact of death. This entails an attempt by the mourner at finding consolation for her or his loss. But before this detachment based on consolation can take place, the mourner must perform certain acts, either in reality or through the mediation of descriptive language. S/he generally begins this whole process with a refusal to accept the reality of the death, then s/he will move to an expression of his/her grief, which may have been preceded by a proclaimed loss of interest in the outside world. Literary expressions of this grief tend to exhibit certain characteristics. They may be accompanied by repetitions and hyperboles (to emphasize the reality of the fact of death). Additionally, questions, invocations, and even curses may be addressed to the dead person (accusations of abandonment may be designed to deflect the guilt of the mourner, who wonders whether some action or even just her/his presence might have prevented the death: thus “where are you?” masks the counter-question “where was I?” when you needed me).<sup>36</sup> Then memories of the deceased may be recalled in great detail; as well, formal ceremonies accompanying the movement of the dead body to the place of burial or disposition may be performed or described. All this leads to the formal statement of how consolation may be achieved.

Virtually all these elements may be traced either in full or by indirect allusion throughout Fadwā Ṭūqān’s elegy. But following at the end of the section devoted to memories of Ibrāhīm, an interesting stanza is placed where Fadwā describes her brother as:

A flower that had perfumed the world with its scent,  
     Then laid down on its side among dreams and poetry,  
     And wilted after the radiant lifetime of a flower  
 Thus pass the lives of flowers  
 And the fragrance remains in the spirits of passers-by.

This stanza, seemingly so unambiguously eulogistic, should certainly catch the eye of anyone familiar with Ibrāhīm’s “Fall of the Nightingale” because it so exactly reverses the associations linked with the constellation of imagery used there. There, the flower was the amoral (female) beloved, who eventually ensnared the youth/bird by her

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of these conventions, see Peter Sacks, 21–22.

treacherous silence. Here, Ibrāhīm has become the flower, a connection naturalized through the allusion to the flower's trait of being short-lived. Further, we find that, not only has Fadwā's brother become the (still female) flower, but it is his/her scent that will be remembered, where earlier the flower's loss of scent had been a tell-tale indice of her wantonness and depravity since it was repeated instances of that behavior which had destroyed the fragrance. Clearly, also, in the poem the symbolic valences of the scent pull it toward an equation with poetry, the talent brother and sister shared. As a poet, then, Fadwā's preservation and memorialization of her brother (and especially her brother as poet) contrasts with her brother's contemptuous treatment in his own poem of the female flower (which significantly had no voice, never spoke directly, throughout the course of "The Fall of the Nightingale"), a contemptuous attitude so unqualified in the text that it could be easily interpreted as a condemnation of the entire female sex. In other words, Fadwā, when she comes to wield the power of discourse, does so constructively (she preserves) while her brother, when earlier given a similar opportunity, wielded his discursive power destructively, to silence and condemn.

The next stanza of the poem, interestingly, both enlarges upon the representation of Fadwā's discursive (female) power and introduces a new note of guilt and ambivalence into that representation:

Whenever the moon rises bright in the night  
 Brimming with light to pour into the veins of flowers  
 My soul grows dark and memory haunts me  
 How I hid you from sight in the darkness of a grave,  
 How I consigned you to the wretched dust.

Here, she takes upon herself both the power to "consign" Ibrāhīm to the grave, and (quite contrary to the actual course of events) the guilt for his death, which has effectively silenced his poetic voice and leaves her in control of his representation to the world.

We should perhaps not be surprised, then, to find that in the next two stanzas Fadwā imagines that Ibrāhīm's voice has returned to challenge the illusion of complete authority her voice had just assumed for itself:

If a vigilant calm should seize the world  
 Where the wretched and the blissful [alike] should slumber  
 A distant voice should not cease to call me  
 From out of the Beyond, sufficient and clear,  
 And pass by, whispering the whisper of the reprovers.

His reproof for my taking life by the ropes [to hold on forever]  
 That I take pleasure from existence and light  
     And the equality of spirit in the valley of mortality  
 The splendor and existence that gave him but little  
 And he is still subject to its deprivation.

Here, Fadwā has not tried to deflect the guilt of the mourner—she embraces it. This path, however, is a dangerous one: for this sense of guilt and responsibility, according to Freud, is precisely what differentiates “healthy” mourning from melancholia (the onset of manic-depressive illness).<sup>37</sup> Whether or not we accept Freud’s postulate of an actual connection between mourning and the occurrence of manic depression, its explanatory power for the fascination with obsessive mourning that we often find manifested in elegies like Fadwā’s cannot be lightly dismissed. Clearly, the speaker’s sense of guilt and self-reproach, more than any other aspect of the mourning process, constitutes in some way a danger point that must be overcome in order for the elegist to proceed to the plateau of consolation.

In “On the Grave,” interestingly, the guilt is not overcome. If in the tenth stanza, the speaker castigates herself for “tak[ing] pleasure from existence and light,” by the end of poem, in the last two stanzas, she is no longer capable of such an action:

O you who call from out of the Beyond,  
     Do you not see how the spring of my life seeps away?  
     That I do not cease to flail about in a sterile existence  
 Barren as the desert, companion to misery  
 Since his star passed away among those setting over the horizon?  
 Where is Ibrāhīm for me, where, where?  
     The seed grain of the heart, the light for these two eyes?  
     I am between life and death  
 Perhaps the time will soon come in full  
 That will anoint the wound and the pains of yearning.

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<sup>37</sup> See Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *General Selections from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. John Rickman (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 125, where he says “The distinguishing features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. This picture becomes a little more intelligible when we consider that, with one exception, the same traits are met with in grief. The fall in self-esteem is absent in grief; but otherwise the features are the same.”

Consolation is never approached, let alone achieved, in this elegy. The best that can be said is that at the beginning of the poem the elegist pictured herself as a “bird with its throat slit”—i.e., actually dead—while at the end she tells us that she is “between life and death,” but her attachment to the deceased is, if anything, stronger than ever. It will be left to other poems to see whether or not her seizure of discursive power will be sustainable and lead to consolation.

“On the Grave” was included in Fadwā Ṭūqān’s first volume of verse almost by accident, on the basis of a decision hastily made by her friend and mentor, the Egyptian literary critic Anwar al-Ma’adāwī, who was shepherding the book through the printing process in Cairo on her behalf.<sup>38</sup> At the last moment, when the work was already set in proof, he found that it would not fill the expected number of pages, so he included at the end of the volume several of Fadwā’s poems that he had originally intended to omit because he considered them to be “poetry of occasion,” not in keeping with the privatized, romantic register of the volume’s proposed title, *Waḥdī ma’a al-Ayyām* (Alone with the Days). “On the Grave” was included in this group.<sup>39</sup> So it would not necessarily be well-advised to assume a deliberate juxtaposition of “On the Grave” with the other poem in the volume that mourns her brother’s death, “Ḥayā(t)” (A Life), even though this latter poem was almost certainly written after “On the Grave,”<sup>40</sup> and it clearly moves beyond its predecessor to search for a mode of consolation rather than simply articulate the painful accents of a grief that must be expressed before it can be assuaged.

To be sure, “A Life” begins with much the same uncompromisingly self-referential stance as “On the Grave” did. The speaker tells us in the initial refrain:<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> For a full account of the relationship between Ṭūqān and Ma’adāwī, including the texts of all the letters that he wrote to her between 1951 and 1954 (when their correspondence ceased), see Rajā’ al-Naqqāsh, *Ṣafahāt Majhūla fī al-Adab al-‘Arabī al-Mu‘āṣir*.

<sup>39</sup> For the text of Ma’adāwī’s letter, with a list of all the poem titles, see Naqqāsh, 193–194.

<sup>40</sup> “A Life” was first published in the January 1950 issue of *Al-Adīb*. I have not yet been able to discover if or where “On the Grave” was published outside of the *dīwān*, but it is not to be found in either *Al-Adīb* or *Al-Risāla*, Fadwā’s two favorite venues for publishing during the period 1949–52.

<sup>41</sup> The poem is cast as a *muwashshaha* (strophic poem). In *muwashshahas* the initial lines of verse mentioned are used later in the poem as a refrain following some or all of the stanzas.

My life is tears  
 And a yearning heart  
 And a desire, and a collection of poetry, and a lute.<sup>42</sup>

Here we see virtually the same use of metaphor as in the opening of “On the Grave” (“My soul . . . is a bird with its throat slit”) to emphasize the speaker’s complete absorption in her grief: now is she is nothing but tears and a heart, the fragmentation of her life figured by the synecdochic rendering of her presence as those two disjointed components which can be made to connect only by assuming a shared emotion.

Yet there is also a greatly heightened attention paid to proclaiming the literariness of this speaker’s experience, even in this short prelude to the main body of the poem. This thematization of the literary is obvious on the surface level through a marked shift in the choice of metaphors in the third line. On the one hand, the speaker’s life may consist of tears, a yearning heart and desire (unmediated emotion), but it is also a collection of poetry and a lute, two readily identifiable tropes for the distancing, (over)wrought patternings of art. Moreover, the literariness of the experience—its mediation—is also thematized brilliantly in the poem as a whole by its metrical and structural confinement in the *muwashshaḥa* form, mapped out in an almost textbook rendering of *mutaqārib* tetrameter. The short, regular accents of this meter (especially when it conforms as closely to the word boundaries as it does at the beginning of this poem), coupled with the frequent internal rhymes Ṭūqān imposes, emphasize quite insistently that this is not everyday human speech but an artfully modified re-deployment of such phrases. There may even be a sort of subtle homage/challenge to Ibrāhīm’s poetry here—just as we saw in the earlier elegy—in that he was known for his interest in the *muwashshaḥa* form and had used it with great success in his famous elegy, “Red Tuesday.”<sup>43</sup>

Whatever the case may be in terms of the strategy Fadwā uses here in evoking her predecessors, there is no doubt that she moves quickly to establish a link between this poem and her first elegy on Ibrāhīm. Once the referential frame has been established in the first

<sup>42</sup> Fadwā Ṭūqān, *Dīwān*, 44.

<sup>43</sup> See Issa Boullata, “Ibrāhīm Ṭūqān’s Poem ‘Red Tuesday,’” *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Literature*, ed. Issa Boullata and Terri DeYoung (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 89 and 92.

lines as private and personal, not public and national, then she moves equally swiftly in the second stanza to evoke a dream vision similar to the one that conjured up her brother's phantom in the earlier poem. But this time it is not her brother who appears, but her father (who had died in 1948):

And a shape appears  
 In the drowsing of the night  
 The shape of my father that has pierced the veil of the otherworld  
 In his eyes the shadow of melancholy thoughts.  
 I see him and my tears pour forth  
 And he bends over me tenderly and weeps with me.  
     And I call out an invitation: "Come,  
     Your journey has been long,  
 With whom shall we seek shelter, when you are far away?"

The contrast with the appearance of Ibrāhīm's phantom in "On the Grave" could not be more striking. There, the phantom did the speaking and his words constituted a reproach to his sister, the poet, for clinging to life while he had been forced to relinquish it. In "A Life," it is the father who does not speak, but instead responds to his daughter's invocation of his spirit in the preceding stanza by weeping in empathy with her sorrow and distress, thus showing his attachment and sympathy for the world of the living. Given the troubled relationship with her father that Fadwā sketches for us in *A Mountainous Journey*, this poetic portrait of the loving, tender paternal figure demonstrates even more strongly than it might seem at first glance that the mourning daughter is exercising her discursive power as a poet to shape reality with much greater confidence than was apparent in "On the Grave."

This confident deployment of discursive poetic power continues into the next stanza, where the image of the brother is summoned up in its turn:

And on the night of my wakefulness  
 My emotions are stirred  
 By a brother who was a well spring of tenderness and love  
 He was the illumination for my eye and my heart  
 But the uncompromising winds of destruction broke  
 And extinguished the precious flame  
     And I ended up alone  
     With no light for guidance  
 Stuttering confusedly in this existence.

Here the loss of her brother, as well, is depicted unambiguously as her being sundered from an idealized male figure whose relationship to her was wholly untroubled and one of complete dependence on him for her part. All the potential conflicts hinted at in “On the Grave” are elided, and the focus is instead placed on the fact that the bereavement makes the speaker (or so she tells us) lose control of her language. But it is precisely poetry and the artfulness of that variety of speech—as has been intimated throughout the poem by the regular reappearance of the initial refrain—which rescues her from incoherence:

And I hang my head  
 In the desolation of my despair  
 And in that spirit whose desires clamor  
 And in that soul whose horizons resound with thunder  
 And I take refuge in poetry as a consolation for my spirit,  
 I depict the images of the desires of a victimized life  
     Then my feelings calm  
     And my soul becomes obedient  
 And the anxiety of my vagrant soul becomes still.

The discipline exerted by the concentrated transformation of experience into art, then, provides the consolation that makes life possible—here we have moved very far from “On the Grave” where the most the speaker could retrieve from the overwhelming pain of her grief was a sense that she stood “between life and death.”

By the end of “A Life” the poet/speaker has progressed to the point where she can say:

And I draw my lute close  
 To my lonely heart,  
 And its strings flutter with melodies  
 It cradles my [infant] heart and clears the darkness of my worries  
 By my art and my poetry and my melodies  
 I defeat the pains of a martyred life  
     And this is my anthem  
     The anthem of my existence,  
 Whose echo will resound long after I am gone:  
 My life is tears  
 And a receptive heart  
 And a desire, and a book of poetry, and a lute

Not only has her artistic activity given her a way to console herself for the loss of those whom she holds dear, but she sees it as giving

her a way to triumph over her own sense of mortality, and the threat of loss of self. That she can see literary art in this way—a reliable vehicle for construction of a coherent female identity—should perhaps be seen as a testimony to the strength of a tradition of women's writing in Arabic, one that has only recently begun to be rivaled by the tradition of women's writing in the West.

On the other hand, the specific form of this consolatory maneuver—taking refuge in the topos of the immortalizing power of art—was one that has been adopted quite infrequently by Arab elegists (especially in comparison to their Western counterparts), and specifically contrasts with the strategies chosen by al-Khansā' in her poems about her brothers. Often, al-Khansā' avoids direct discussion of how consolation may be achieved. When she does approach this topic, however, she generally proclaims it to be possible only when vengeance for the deaths of Ṣakhr or Mu'āwiya is carried out.<sup>44</sup>

Fadwā's refusal to follow her precursor in calling for vengeance as a (or perhaps the only) viable means of consolation carries over to inform the structure of the last elegy for Ibrāhīm she composed during the early period of her work: "Ḥulm al-Dhikrā" (A Dream on the Anniversary of His Death), which appears in her second collection, *Wajadtuhā* (I Have Found It—1956).

There, she begins (as in both the earlier elegies) with a statement that emphasizes the intense, obsessive nature of her grief:

My brother, O most loved cry which flutters  
On my lips, weighed down with tender concern.<sup>45</sup>

As brief as this segment is, the choice of words here subtly suggests the openings of the two previous poems. First, there is its reference to "fluttering" (*raffa*), a verb in Arabic that collocates most frequently with flying creatures, thus recalling the bird of "On the Grave." "A Life," on the other hand, is evoked by the allusions to "lips" (both a body part, like the heart and tears/eyes in the refrain of that poem, and even more tellingly the organ of speech, through which the consolatory poetry must be articulated), and to "tender concern" (*hanān*) a closely related member of the same semantic field of emotional terms as the adjective "yearning" (*wulū'*) and the noun "desires" (*ashwāq*).

<sup>44</sup> See al-Khansā', *Dīwān*, 144–145.

<sup>45</sup> Fadwā Ṭūqān, *Dīwān*, 174 (18).

Initially, the awareness of the deceased's all pervading presence is reproduced in this work as well:

What is the matter with me? Whenever I think of you, I feel that you  
Are around me in every place.

I sense your presence, I believe that you  
Hear my voice here, that you see me.

How often your phantom appears to my spirit in sleep  
Whenever slumber wraps round and encloses me.

There would not seem to be much room here for the consolation of poetic recollection in tranquillity. The choice of location for the encounter between the siblings, however, the dream vision, is significant just as it was in the earlier elegies. Just as happened there, the appearance of Ibrāhīm in a dream is where the significant revision of the impasse generated in the opening lines will take place, in this instance precisely at the moment of speech:

“Brother!” I shouted those words and pushed  
Toward you, with all my longing and love.

But your eyes were focused on the  
Horizon, arching upwards.

And you were sad, upon  
Your brow was a touch of worry and melancholy.

An old wound on your side bleeds,  
I feel with it a leaping in my [own] side.

My eyes traveled to where you were staring  
A hidden weight had crawled into my heart.

Through smoke which rose and swirled  
I saw our sacred soil a sterile ruin.

The presentation of Ibrāhīm in these lines contrasts starkly with the description of him in both previous elegies. In “On the Grave,” he was not seen at all—only heard reproving his sister for her attachment to life. In “A Life,” in contrast, he is not heard but instead (briefly) seen—as an “illumination” (*diyā*) that quickly disappears into the darkness, leaving his sister alone and unguided. In this poem, he is certainly visible in the dream but he does not respond to the speaker's call. Further, he is not looking at her, but at something else on the horizon, and he seems worried, though she does not know (or tell us) why. Strangest of all, he has a bleeding wound on

his side, and when the speaker sees this, she seems to experience the sensation of a similar injury on her own body.

This wound reference, despite its abrupt introduction here and its apparent unaccountability, arises quite specifically out of one of the most popular literary topoi in Arabic poetry of the 1950s: deployment of references to the myths of death and rebirth we find recounted in James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Many Arab poets of the this period—Fadwā included—had become interested in this myth through their reading of T.S. Eliot's poetry, particularly *The Waste Land*, and they saw in those myths a powerful tool for exploring the possibilities and paths of cultural and political rebirth in their society, which they believed had undergone a kind of cultural repression to the point of extinction during the colonial period.

By depicting Ibrāhīm as wounded like the dying gods in the stories of Tammuz, Osiris and Adonis (even the crucified and wounded Christ of the Gospels, whose resemblance to the pagan demigods Frazer takes pains to point out), Fadwā retells the story of his death as a sacrifice necessary for the renewal of the land and the continuance of life for those left behind. Nor is that all. She also associates herself with the same sacrificial redeemer's role, since she too feels the pain of the wound in her own side. And unlike her brother, she is still present to articulate the meaning of that sacrifice: literally, to re-present her brother for the poem's audience. This she does in the ensuing lines. The vision she experiences as she follows her brother's glance to where she sees the "sacred soil" of her homeland as a sterile ruin is not so much a vision of a place as of a people—clearly the Palestinians—following the Arab defeat in the 1948 war:

And I saw my people's severed limbs here  
And there, on the public thoroughfares.

Eyes gouged out, scattered on the ground,  
Their pupils streaming blood.

Hands cut off, and heads,  
Their pallid colors flooding the tombs.

Beyond the smoke there was a group  
Scattered in every desert.

A humble flock, the remnant  
Of my people, forlorn and hunted.

Once the speaker sees in herself a will to sacrifice herself and her personal happiness—perhaps even life—to help others (here specifically to place them in the foreground of her poem), the pain of Ibrāhīm’s death recedes to be replaced by a new and more purposive object of mourning: her people. To record the sufferings of those still present about her, to publicize their plight, becomes here a much more constructive deployment of her poetic talent for expressing mourning than to remain wedded to the obsession with a personal grief that cannot be directly assuaged, for Ibrāhīm himself cannot come back.

But in her fidelity to the psychological truth of the mourning process, where the depersonalizing thrust of consolation is not always unproblematically achieved in the first attempt, Fadwā does not let her speaking voice remain so calmly anchored for long. Almost immediately, the speaker turns away from her Olympian calm and turns to address her brother directly once more:

“Brother, have you seen how the matter  
Has ended up? Have you seen that terrible destiny,  
“Do you remember when you sent forth your poems,  
Traversing our sacred soil like a windstorm of flame?  
“You warned them then of the disgrace of the outcome,  
As though you were reading the tablet of the Unseen.”  
But your phantom began to vanish  
Beyond the horizon, silent, not answering,  
Your wound dripping the purest blood  
(Red-)dyed clouds disquieting my entrails.  
And they were left hugging the wound of the sacred soil,  
Our sacred soil nailed upon the cross.

Ibrāhīm’s prophetic prediction and his sacrificial death are here revealed to be insufficient to heal the wound. It would seem left to the speaker and those still alive around her to incorporate the experience within themselves personally in order to overcome the threat of death.

The call, then, in this poem is not the ancient call for vengeance, such as we find in al-Khansā’s work. It is not to kill but to be willing to die and suffer for others—thus Ibrāhīm’s death is seen in a new light and Fadwā’s mourning is focused on a new object. This movement, mediated by love, beyond concern solely for the individual psychology of reaction to death in her poetry is a new kind of

depersonalization that sets Fadwā apart from the classical elegists, perhaps most especially al-Khansā'. In this case, it would seem to reflect quite unproblematically, the highest ideals expressed in Ibrāhīm's elegiac work "Red Tuesday" when he says: "No rank of eternity is reached/Without an acceptable sacrifice./Long live the souls that die/In sacrifice for their homeland."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Issa Boullata, "Ibrāhīm Ṭūqān's Poem 'Red Tuesday,'" 97.

## THE DECEMBER FLOWER

FADWĀ ṬŪQĀN

A handwritten copy in Arabic of the following poem was given to me by Fadwā Ṭūqān during my visit with her in her Nablus house in June, 1998. The Arabic original has never before been published in its entirety—Kamal Abdel-Malek.

Grim December stepped up to me  
As it wrapped the somber evening with snow  
On the far end of the cosmos  
The moon slithered its weary way  
Towards the cave of twilight  
The winter wind undressed the universe,  
Divesting it of its life-givingness.

Flower, you miracle flower  
How did you escape the captivity of snow,  
The jurisdiction of frost?  
How did you acquire loveliness,  
Such floescence, such imposing brilliance?  
You spread on my universe  
The spring's happy mien,  
You altered the sacramental sequence of seasons  
And touched the miraculous, the startling, the unrealizable  
With your fingertips.

You quenched my thirst when you raised to my lips  
A wine glass filled with a centuries-old red intoxication,  
You conferred on me the splendor, the exultation,  
The opulence of the rainbow's broad smile  
You taught me how the unattainable begets a reality  
How this brittle life metamorphoses itself  
Into a new engendering, a new familiarity.

Flower, mistress of all,  
 You are a jar of perfume that scents my heart's murals  
 You are the queen of my heart  
 And life's most priceless bequest.

—translated by Kamal Abdel-Malek

### وردة ديسمبر

واقبل ديسمبر الجهم نحوي يحث خطاه  
 يدثر بالثلج جسم المساء الكئيب  
 وكان القمر  
 على طرف الكون يزحف واهي الخطى  
 نحو كهف المغيب  
 و ريح الشتاء تعري الوجود وتفرغه من هبات الحياة

فيا انت ، يا الوردة المعجزة  
 ترى كيف افلتت من معطف الثلج—  
 كيف عبرت حقول الصقيع  
 وكيف نهضت بهذا الرواء—  
 بهذا التوهج ، هذا السطوع البديع  
 نشرت على الكون حولي  
 بشاشة وجه الربيع ، وغيرت طقس الفصول  
 ولامست معجزة الخلق والمدهش المستحيل  
 واية كأس نبذ رفعت الى شفتي واي انتشاء  
 بخمر تعتق عبر الدهور واي ارتواء  
 طلعت علي واهدتني  
 كل هذا الجمال وكل ينابيع هذا الفرح  
 وكل ثراء الحياة وكل ابتسامات قوس قزح  
 وعلمتني كيف تصبح دنيا المحال البعيد المنال حقيقة  
 وكيف تحول هشاشة هذى الحياة  
 وتخلق خلقا جديدا ، فتغدو الحياة صديقة  
 وياوردة الورد ، ياحق طيب يعطر جدران قلبي شذاه  
 وياوردة الورد سيدة القلب انت  
 واحلى واغلى هبات الحياة

## SINDBAD THE SAILOR AND THE EARLY ARABIC NOVEL

ROGER ALLEN

A major problem of imbalance confronts those who would endeavor to trace the course of development of Arabic literary genres during the 19th century. For, while we possess an abundance of information and critical opinion concerning the state of Western literary genres at that period and also regarding the means by which they were introduced to the Middle East, the same does not hold true of the indigenous literary tradition. Our knowledge of the literary production of the centuries preceding the 19th is scant indeed, reflecting in large part a sense that, whatever works may have been written, the esthetic norms of the period were completely alien to those of subsequent eras. As a result, it has been possible to declare the period one of "decadence" and to posit relatively little connection between the revival movement of the 19th century (*al-nahḍa*) and the period immediately preceding it.

However, in the particular realm of narrative there is, of course, one great source within the Arabic tradition, albeit it within the "popular" sphere, that had already moved from the Middle East to Europe, the world-famous collection of tales known as *A Thousand and One Nights*. The earliest part of this collection (approximately the first 250 or so Nights) had been translated into French by Antoine Galland and published in French between 1704 and 1717. In the decades that followed that translation was rendered into a number of European languages, and a concerted effort began to expand the original collection (which has now been published in the wonderful Arabic edition of Muhsin Mahdi)<sup>1</sup> so as to fill out the complete number of 1001 Nights. A variety of other tales and tale collections was added; one such was the collection of Sindbad the Sailor (which Galland himself had translated), another was the moral fable of "The City of Brass"; still another was a collection of animal fables. As is

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<sup>1</sup> *Kūṭāb Alf Laylah wa-Laylah*, ed. Muhsin Mahdi. 2 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984); English translation of this edition: *The Arabian Nights* trans. Husain Haddawy (New York & London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1990).

well known, this expanded collection was to become one of the most widely read works in European culture during the 18th and 19th centuries, making its way into the forms of artistic expression within many national cultures. It is within this particular context that I wish to place the current short study, dedicated to a dear colleague who has shared my own interest in modern Arabic narratives, in that I will try to provide one small link between the gradual process that led to the emergence of modern Arabic fictional genres and the indigenous tradition that precedes it.

One of the more obvious avenues through which Western fictional genres came to the attention of the still small reading public in the Arab world was through the process of translation. Motivations for this transfer of texts from one culture to another varied: from the religious with the project fostered by the Protestant Churches to translate the Bible into Arabic in Lebanon, to the more military goals of Muḥammad ‘Alī in Egypt whose missions of students to Europe were a direct consequence of his personal encounter with the technological superiority of the French army. However, whatever the initial goals may have been, the purview of the translators inevitably expanded to include other texts and genres. In the latter half of the 19th century, this expanded interest in translation coincided (and indeed was fostered by) a rapid expansion in opportunities for publication afforded by the emergence of a vigorous press tradition. As had been the case in the Western world, newspapers and periodicals provided an ideal medium for the publication of varieties of translated materials (alongside the more traditional types of expression, such as the occasional ode in celebration of some important state event or anniversary). The very same process of serialization that had provided the medium for the initial publication of the novels of Dickens was now available in the Arab world.

Among the earliest of works of European fiction that were serialized in this fashion was the renowned novel of Alexandre Dumas père, *The Count of Monte Cristo*.<sup>2</sup> Records of press publications at the time suggest that it had been translated into Arabic twice, serialized, and published in book form by 1870.<sup>3</sup> It has always struck me as

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this study I am using the English translation: Alexandre Dumas, *The Count of Monte Cristo* ed. David Coward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990 [a reprint of the anonymous 1852 version]).

<sup>3</sup> See Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* (Washington: Three Continents Press, 1983), 78.

significant that this novel was among the first to be rendered into not only Arabic, but Persian and Turkish as well.<sup>4</sup> Its repertoire of adventure, deception, intrigue, lost love, enormous wealth, and revenge are, of course, more than enough to link it to any number of narrative traditions and thus to make it an obvious choice for translation in its own right. Bearing in mind the immense popularity that was to be achieved in subsequent decades by historical and adventure romances that were penned by Arab writers in emulation of the highly attractive models provided by this and other works of Dumas, not to mention those of Jules Verne, the process of development from translation, via imitation, to the emergence of an incipient tradition of the Arabic novel, and particularly the historical novel, seem a natural one. However, having just completed a re-reading of Dumas's novel after many years, I must confess to having been struck almost from the outset by another process of transfer that its text so clearly reveals.

Edmond Dantes, who is to emerge from his unjust and lengthy imprisonment as the Count of Monte Cristo, is first introduced to the reader as an accomplished sailor. As the novel opens, the boat in which he has been sailing, itself called "Le Pharaon," has been plying the Mediterranean from Smyrna in Turkey, via Naples, to Marseille. Upon the death of the ship's captain at sea, the nineteen-year-old youth is on the point of being declared its new captain when he is falsely accused of involvement in a political conspiracy and consigned to the dreaded Chateau d'If. But, just in case this nautical theme and its allusive power is overlooked, the author makes sure that the Count continually adopts a very particular pseudonym as he goes about the pursuit of his goal of rewarding the virtuous and seeking revenge on those who have plotted against him: that of Sindbad the Sailor. As such he has sailed "over the immense lake, extending from Gibraltar to the Dardanelles, and from Tunis to Venice."<sup>5</sup> He has "a seraglio in Cairo, one at Smyrna, and one at Constantinople"; furthermore, he has a Nubian slave named 'Alī to

<sup>4</sup> For details concerning the Turkish translation [1871], see Ahmet Evin, *Origins and Development of the Turkish Novel* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1983), 41–49. The Persian translation was completed in 1873 but not published until 1891. For details, see Christophe Balay and Michel Cuypers, "Aux sources de la nouvelle persane" Institut français d'iranologie de Teheran, 1983 (Bibliothèque iranienne 28): 50. I am grateful to my colleague, Prof. William Hanaway, for the latter reference.

<sup>5</sup> *Count*, 1084.

whom he talks in Arabic.<sup>6</sup> And, as this enormous narrative reaches its closure, the Count's vessel is spotted by the young lovers whom he has reunited sailing away from the island that has given him his name. The sailor, returned from the sea, ends his narrative by setting his sails once more.

The adoption of the pseudonym Sindbad guarantees that this evocative reference to the hero of Middle Eastern lore will recur throughout the narrative, but it is just one among a number of instances that link the novel and collection of tales to each other. It is perhaps an indication of the pervasiveness of the influence that *The Arabian Nights*—to use the favored title of European versions—had at this time that a dialogue in the text of the novel itself asks:

Have you read the Arabian Nights?  
What a question!<sup>7</sup>

The fabulous atmosphere invoked by the tales is referred to at many points in the narrative: its heroes, its princesses, its enormous treasures, and (of course) Ali Baba and “open sesame.”<sup>8</sup> The vogue for imitating “Arabian manners” is mentioned at several points. An “Oriental feast . . . of such a kind as the Arabian fairies might be supposed to prepare” is described in detail, as is the custom of eating bread and salt as a symbol of friendship, and of drinking coffee “in the original Arabian manner.”<sup>9</sup> For those interested in the linkages between Western and Middle Eastern narratives, however, the most remarkable of these passages of Dumas is the description of the room of Haydee, the Greek princess who, through capture and enslavement, has become the Count's property:

The rooms had been fitted up in strict accordance with the Eastern style, that is to say, the floors were covered with the richest carpets Turkey could produce; the walls hung with brocaded silk of the most magnificent designs and texture; while around each chamber, luxurious divans were placed, with piles of soft and yielding cushions, that needed only to be arranged at the pleasure or convenience of such as sought repose. . . . Haydee was reclining on soft, downy cushions, covered with blue satin spotted with silver; her head, supported by one of her exquisitely moulded arms, rested on the divan immediately

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<sup>6</sup> *Count*, 939; 381, 486, 865–66, 1054.

<sup>7</sup> *Count*, 400.

<sup>8</sup> *Count*, 291, 549, 764, 390.

<sup>9</sup> *Count*, 636, 701, 767.

beneath her, while the other was employed in adjusting to her lips the coral tube of a rich narghile, whose flexible pipe, placed amid the coolest and most fragrant essences, permitted not the perfumed vapour to ascend until fully impregnated with the rich odours of the most delicious flowers.<sup>10</sup>

When the Sudanese novelist, al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, seeks to depict the extent of cultural misunderstanding between the Middle East and the West in his famous novel, *Mawsim al-Hijra ilā al-Shamāl* (1966; *Season of Migration to the North*, 1969) and makes use of two rooms, one in London, the other in the Sudan, to serve as potent symbols of the gap involved, he would need to look no further than passages such as the one just cited.<sup>11</sup>

These linkages to the fabled East are matched by invocations of historical context. The earlier part of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and the intrigues that it narrates are much involved with the career and fate of Napoleon Bonaparte and the restoration of the French monarchy, as careers and fortunes are won and lost depending on the political influences and allegiances at work. These references to historical events place the novel in a very particular period of French (and European) history, but the narrative also makes reference to Middle Eastern events. The fate of Haydee, mentioned above, draws attention to the fighting in the Balkans and in particular to the battles and intrigues involving Ali Pasha (1741–1822) who maintained dominion over the region until he was ousted by Ottoman forces commanded by Khurshid Pasha and put to death. It is these events that are integrated into the narrative of the novel itself when they are recounted by Haydee herself as part of the evidence at the trial of Monsieur de Moncerf, as Fernand Mondego (who has married Dantes's beloved, Mercedes) has come to call himself in his new Parisian persona.<sup>12</sup> There is also mention of Muḥammad 'Alī (1769–1849), the Albanian-born commander of the Ottoman forces sent to Egypt against Napoleon's invading force who rose to become the founder of the ruling dynasty of that country that lasted until the revolution of 1952.<sup>13</sup>

The sense of contextual symmetry that is established by these his-

<sup>10</sup> *Count*, 499–500.

<sup>11</sup> See al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, *Mawsim al-Hijra ilā al-Shamāl* (Beirut: Dār al-'Awda, 1967), 34–35, 147; *Season of Migration to the North* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 30–31, 146.

<sup>12</sup> *Count*, 860–69.

<sup>13</sup> *Count*, 235, 669, 401.

torical references and the framing motif of sea travel is a reflection, needless to say, of Dumas's extreme interest and involvement in the events of his time and of his long acknowledged skill in controlling the course and structure of extremely lengthy narratives.<sup>14</sup> However, within that framework the reader soon discovers that the sequencing of the complex story itself is of a diffusiveness that is very redolent of the narrative logic of the tale collection that has so clearly inspired the author. For further evidence of this we can consider the form of the novel itself and the mode of its composition and publication.<sup>15</sup> The work consists of 117 chapters; the first 30 are set in Marseille, the following nine (31–39) in Rome; and the remainder in Paris. The length of each chapter is clearly a reflection of the circumstances of the work's publication: as is the case with many early novels, *The Count of Monte Cristo* appeared first in serial form in a newspaper, *Le journal des débats* (beginning in 1844). The idea for the novel had come to Dumas while reading an account of an actual series of events that occurred in 1807 and involved a man of Marseille named François Picaud. Prompted by his publisher to make novelistic use of this story, Dumas composed first the chapters set in Rome (31–39); in other words, dealing with the immediate consequences of his emergence from his lengthy prison term and the whereabouts of his friends and enemies (and their offspring). Dumas then wrote the initial chapters in which he lays out the circumstances that will furnish the motivations for what is to follow: his knowledge of the entire Mediterranean region, his probity, his devotion to his aged father and to the Morrel family who have provided his means of support, his love for the fiery Mercedes (and her love for him in spite of the continuing attentions of Fernand—as noted above, later to become M. de Moncerf), and—particularly important—his immense learning gained during his years spent in the Chateau d'If at the hands of his fellow prisoner, the Abbe Faria, who also shares with him the secret of the fabulous treasure hidden on the Island of Monte Cristo.<sup>16</sup> The publication of this portion of the novel (the first 39 chapters) was completed in 1844, but it was

<sup>14</sup> Indeed Dumas gives an indication of such control when he refers his readers back to the novel's chronological beginnings ("which our readers must have been familiar with at the commencement of this story"), *Count*, 1058.

<sup>15</sup> For further details, see John Coward's "Introduction" to *The Count of Monte Cristo* (cited in note 2).

<sup>16</sup> *Count*, 144 ff.

another two years before the rest of the novel (Chapters 40–117) was published, involving the lengthy and complex process whereby the Count seeks out his enemies in their prominent positions in Paris and uses his immense wealth to provide the circumstances whereby their own deeply flawed selves can bring about their own downfall.

These details of the novel's composition, coupled to Dumas's own artistic instincts and priorities, serve to explain in large part the digressive nature of the narrative that is *The Count of Monte Cristo*. When, at Chapter 31, we are suddenly transported to Rome under the heading "Sindbad the Sailor," we come to realize that we are dealing with what, from one point of view, is the actual "beginning" of the work itself. But, alongside the spatial aspects of such rapid narrative shifts, there are those of time. The Count spends some fifteen years in prison; the fifteen months needed to carve out an escape tunnel are covered in three paragraphs.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the intrigues and stratagems needed to establish and then punish the crimes of the Count's enemies cover a six month period but are elaborated by the author through a series of detailed descriptions, copious dialogues, and digressions that occupy the rest of the narrative (some 57 chapters). The descriptions of gardens, of architecture, and, above all, details of arias from the latest operas performed in Paris, clearly reflect a desire on the author's part to place his narrative into an "authentic" context, but the many digressions (such as the one on poisons)<sup>18</sup> are of an elaboration that would appear to be more a reflection of the lengthy process of publication and the sheer delight in the display of learning than of a novelist's quest for a clearly cohesive and dynamic narrative. The linkages of the incipient novel in the various European cultural traditions to earlier narrative types have been much explored, and critics have drawn attention to the wayward quality of what one might term the "plot-line" in such narratives as *Tom Jones*. In pointing out certain linkages here between Dumas's famous novel and some narrative features that are typical of *A 1001 [Arabian] Nights*, I am obviously not endeavoring to remove the former from its place in the history of the European novel, but merely to suggest that, since Dumas makes such a deliberate and frequent practice of referring to the collection of Arabic tales at almost every stage in the novel, it is not out of the ques-

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<sup>17</sup> *Count*, 146.

<sup>18</sup> *Count*, 529ff.

tion to suggest that the linkages between the two go beyond the mere use of names, places, and “manners.” Above all, when the process of translation of European works into Arabic gained pace in the 19th century, the choice of *The Count of Monte Cristo*—with its Arabic-speaking hero who calls himself “Sindbad the Sailor” and its copious reference to the Middle East—was a natural choice for early transfer to a new cultural environment.

Dumas’s choice of a crime report as the basis for a novel that would be set within the political intrigues of post-Napoleonic France provided a clear model for those who would attempt to replicate the historical romance novel in Arabic. None of the latter would rival the size of Dumas’s works, but then the circumstances of sponsorship were very different. Dumas became a very rich man as the result of his publications, even to the extent of building a Chateau de Monte Cristo, but in a close replication of the events of one of his own novels, he proceeded to squander most of his wealth. The Lebanese writer, Jūrjī Zaydān (1861–1914), who emigrated to Egypt and established his own Hilāl publishing house there, set himself to emulate the writings of Dumas, Scott, and other prominent contributors to the European tradition of historical novels. Zaydān’s examples in Arabic are more modest than those of Dumas in size and scope, and, while they do not introduce the Arab reader to an almost mythical super-hero of the type of the Count of Monte Cristo, they do follow the lead of European models like Dumas by incorporating a local, “human-interest” story of family life and love into the larger historical framework that, in the case of Zaydān, is clearly the major focus of his educational intentions. Zaydān was clearly more judicious than Dumas in financial matters, in that he used his publishing house to publish not only a whole series of novels set in different periods of Arab and Islamic history but also to provide the ever increasing Egyptian and Arab-world readership with studies of its history and culture. However, reverting for one last time to the chronological context of Dumas’s novel, one is left to wonder what motivations may have led Zaydān to commence his novelistic survey of the history of his own region with three works that deal with the most recent period in Egyptian history in the 18th and 19th centuries?<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Jūrjī Zaydān, *Al-Mamlūk al-Shārid*, 1891; *Asīr al-Mutamahdī*, 1893; *Istibdād al-Mamālīk*, 1893. See ‘Abd al-Muhsin Ṭāhā Badr, *Ṭaṭawwur al-Riwāya al-‘Arabiyya al-Ḥadītha fī Miṣr: 1870–1938* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1963), 93–106, 409, and Moosa, *Origins*, 157–69.

## THE INFILTRATORS

ḤANNĀ IBRĀHĪM

Translated from the Arabic by KAMAL ABDEL-MALEK

Ḥannā Ibrāhīm is an Israeli Arab author who was born in 1927 in Galilee, Palestine. Until the outbreak of the 1948 war, he lived in Bethlehem where he taught law. After the war, he joined the Israeli Communist Party. He published numerous short stories as well as an autobiographical work under the telling title, *Memoirs of a Young Man Who Did Not Leave His Homeland* (1996). In 1954, he published his short story, "Mutasallilūn" (The Infiltrators) in *al-Jadīd*, the Arabic-language publication of the Israeli Communist party. The same story was later published in 1972 in a collection entitled, *Azhār Bariyya*. What is remarkable, and perhaps unique, about this short story is the fact that it is told entirely from the point of view of a Jewish Israeli character.

\* \* \*

Anxiously, Sarah looked at her watch. She knitted her eyebrows and glanced at the overcast sky. There were gray clouds moving from the west as though they were vapors emitting from a pot with boiling water. Cold winds blew and caused the last leaves of the fig tree in front of the cottage to fall down.

Shmuel did not come back as he was expected; there must have been something serious that had prevented him from returning. A painful sense of loss ran through Sarah. The thought of spending the night alone in that cottage in a village so close to the borders was enough to make her shiver.

The sky was full of black clouds and the darkness of the evening gradually sneaked up on the horizon while rain started to drizzle. Sarah quickly went inside, shivering from the cold. She began to pace up and down in nervous and accelerated steps. Suddenly, she picked up her coat and put it on. She put a scarf around her neck and for a long time, she looked for her shoes around the room. When she knelt down to see if the shoes were under the bed, she

heard the noise of an approaching car and her heart leapt up with joy. It must be Shmuel; he’s back, she said to herself. She hurriedly left the room and by the time she reached the window, the car had come to a halt even though the engine was still thundering. Rain was falling down profusely and a thick fog was enveloping the earth. A head popped out of the car window; she recognized it as that of a police officer. She expected the door of the car to open and her husband to jump out but nothing of the sort happened. She heard the officer greet her and before she had time to return his greeting he said,

“Shmuel will spend the night in the city and won’t be back until tomorrow afternoon. Take this newspaper.”

He handed her the newspaper. The car went away with Sarah’s following it as though she were struck by lightning. But the rain did not allow her to continue feeling struck. She retreated with an overwhelming sense of sad despair, feeling utterly downhearted. For the first time since she got married, she felt that way. She sat on the corner of the bed and turned on the lamp with a shaken hand. She noticed the newspaper and shook some of the rain drops off it then threw it on the table in a non-challant manner. But no sooner had she done that than she lifted it up and read a small headline:

**“INFILTRATORS TOOK OVER A HOUSE IN KFAR ELYAHO VILLAGE AND KILLED . . .”**

Her heart beat fast as she was reading the headline. She felt her heart beat pulsating in her ears. Wind blew through the door and caused the light of the lamp to flicker and finally go off. In fear, she hurriedly made it to the door to lock it with the dead bolt.

This was not the first time Sarah read a headline such as that one. But it was the first time such news frightened her. In the past she used to feel good about news of the killing or the arrest of such infiltrators; news which were frequently published in daily newspapers. She used to feel amazed at the audacity of those infiltrators who could not bring themselves to recognize the existence of the state of Israel and who, with their criminal activities, continuously terrorized the residents of the border villages. Before their marriage, her husband Shmuel used to work as the assistant of the military commander of one of the border posts and when Sarah once admitted to him that she was concerned that the Arab infiltrators might kill him, Shmeul derisively laughed. He would go on to tell her of the many cases in which the infiltrators ended up either being killed

or arrested and incarcerated in dark jails. Only then would she feel reassured, though at times she would also feel a bit sympathetic to the plight of those ill-fated infiltrators who undermined the safety of the border regions. She would liken the infiltrators to the butterflies which, hovering close to the fire, would be burned in it. Such thoughts, anyway, would only last for short moments and she would forget all about them. Life would go on with its habitually merry pace for she was happily married. She used to read the evening newspapers regularly and follow the news of her native and beloved country where she was born and raised. She had confidence in the skill and ingenuousness of the Jewish people; for example, look at Shmuel whom she began to teach Arabic after their engagement: he had mastered the language only in one and a half years and even outdid her—his own teacher. After their marriage, her husband was appointed as a teacher in a village adjacent to the borders and so she moved from the city to a beautiful cottage in the village. Not far from the cottage was the school building in the midst of an orchard of olive trees. One and a half years passed during which the village was far from the reach of infiltrators' harm.

The wind was strongly blowing and continued to blow. From time to time rain would fall heavily then would stop. From under the window sill cold wind would infiltrate into the room and would cause the lamp light to flicker, this in turn would make the shadows of the hung laundry on the clothes line in the middle of the room dance on the wall. Sarah recoiled in bed after she had turned down the lamp light and felt the pistol under the pillow. Upon touching the cold steel of the pistol, she felt reassured. Shmuel had trained her in how to use it. She closed her eyes trying to sleep the night away.

Sarah did not know how much time had elapsed before she was awakened suddenly. She listened carefully; the air was still, silence reigned supreme. She felt her heart pounding inside her chest and fear running through her. She sat up in bed as she heard some rustling at the door. She had a strong urge to scream but fear paralyzed her. She felt dizzy; many strange images ran through her head, and suddenly she remembered everything she had read about the infiltrators and their raids. Faint whisper reached her as well as the rustling against the door. Something cold touched her finger and she realized it was the pistol which she gripped and pointed to the door with a shaking hand. Holding her breath she waited as her

heart kept pounding loudly. Suddenly silence was broken by a baby crying. She felt relieved since infiltrators would not usually bring babies with them. She heard someone coughing and complaining about the cold. Later there were faint knocks on the door. With the pistol in her right hand, she approached the door and in a controlled voice she asked in Hebrew,

“Who’s it?”

A female voice answered in Arabic,

“Open the door for the sake of Allah”.

The baby started to cry out loud once again and the woman tried to calm it down with a voice choked with tears.

Cautiously, Sarah opened the door, stepped aside and said in a commanding tone,

“Enter!”

Clad in black rags, the woman entered. Her head was wrapped in a dirty black scarf, and in her arms was the baby crying still. Rain was dripping from the corners of her wet close-fitting clothes. Behind her appeared a man with a bent back, dirty clothes, and with his gray beard looking pale in the dim light of the lamp. With shaky hand he wrapped himself with a loose overcoat. Before he entered, he bowed slightly in order to squeeze dry the corners of his overcoat. Sarah watched him with intense caution. From her corner, she could see the moonlight over the sleepy village being chased by a fleeting cloud and speedily approaching her cottage. At the entrance of the cottage, the old man was squeezing the rain water out of his clothes, the water drops falling on the tiled passage causing the glistening drizzles to fly around in the moonlight. When he stood straight, he almost lost his balance. Sarah noticed that his left foot was without a shoe and whenever he took a step forward there was a faint noise that indicated that the shoe on his right foot was soaked with rain water.

After she had closed the door, Sarah turned up the lamp light and began to stare at the faces of her guests. The (Arab) woman at that point sank into the chair that was close to the entrance to the kitchen removing the tattered scarf off her head. Her face appeared pale as though it had no life. She looked at Sarah with two languid eyes and leaned over her baby who was sobbing and groaning weakly. Suddenly she burst out crying. Around her chair there formed a small pool from the rain water dripping continually from her clothes. To her side stood the man in the shadow of the laundered clothes

which were hung on the wire. He was fidgeting, moving one foot to put it on top of the other. With his dim face and wandering glances he looked as though he were the very embodiment of human misery.

Sarah still held the pistol in her hand. As she was about to lay it on the table she suddenly remembered something. She turned towards the man and motioned to him to approach her and to take off his overcoat (in order to carry out their mission, it was the infiltrators' habit to put on disguises). The old man took off the overcoat and unenthusiastically looked around him to find a place to hang it. His hands were shaking and his teeth chattering. He looked at the woman as she was still crying in a choked voice, and his eyes caught Sarah's. The lamp's light fell on his wrinkled face. Sarah did not know whether the two drops rolling down his cheeks were rain drops or tears. Suddenly, the overcoat fell off his hand and when he tried to kneel to pick it up, he lost his balance and fell down. He did not make any effort to stand up but instead he laid his head between his trembling knees.

At that point, Sarah felt acute pain cutting through her chest. She threw the pistol on the bed and rushed to turn on the heater and put it close to the woman. She brought the woman dry clothes and motioned to her to change her and her baby's clothes. Sarah did not wait for the woman to do that; she took the woman's baby and wrapped it with her husband's clothes. Even though the woman resisted, Sarah led her to the kitchen where she forced her to change her clothes. As for the old man, he refused to change his clothes and was content to sit beside the heater to warm his hands and dry his wet clothes.

While the guests were sipping hot tea, after they had eaten their fill, the woman went on to tell Sarah what had happened to them. She said that the old man was her father, the baby her son. They came from Haifa, she said, and were forced to flee the country during the 1948 war. In exile, her mother died of pleurisy. Cold and malnutrition worsened her condition and hastened her death. Since at the time the woman was engaged to her cousin who had stayed behind in the country (Israel), they all decided to return. Once in the country, she married her cousin but soon they, the woman and her father, were found out and deported by the (Israeli) authorities on the grounds that they were infiltrators. But after unbelievable difficulties they managed to return for the second time. In Israel, she gave birth to her baby. One night the soldiers stormed their

home and arrested them all. Her husband was sentenced to a six-month jail term for having given refuge to infiltrators. As for her, her baby and father, they were jailed for four months after which the authorities decided to deport them. It was during that windy and ill-fated day that they were deported. At the borders they lost their way in the thick fog and heavy relentless rain. In their search for a refuge from the cold and rain they stumbled into Sarah’s home, and here they were.

Hind (the Arab woman) was relating her story as though she were in a dream. With sad eyes, she looked around the room. Her voice was choked as though by tears. In the beginning, the old man confirmed the details of her story, but later, while resting his head between his knees, he would nod drowsily—a habit he picked in jail. Sarah was listening to the woman with wide open eyes, not knowing whether to believe her or not.

Hind stopped talking. Heavy silence prevailed. The baby fidgeted and emitted a low, weak cry. Rain drops fell on a tin board outside.

The old man slowly lifted his head and asked Sarah about the time. He then turned to his daughter who, at the same time, was looking at him while resting her chin on the palm of her hand.

“Hind, let’s go,” said the old man.

Sarah interrupted by saying,

“Where will you go on this rainy night? Wait until the morning!”

The old man shook his head and said,

“We cannot stay, we cannot. Our stay does not benefit us in any way and may perhaps cause you some trouble. He who never tried the bitter taste of adversity would not know the pain of the afflicted. It’s hard to believe it; how can this be that a man’s own land is forbidden to him? I do not know what is happening; are we not still human beings, are they not? Such are the days we are living in!”

Sarah did not understand everything the old man said but sensed the great injustice he so bitterly complained about. Once more it appeared to her that his eyes glistened with what looked like tears, the tears of the one who was down and out.

Sarah wrapped two oranges and some bread crumbs in a newspaper and, as she was seeing them off at the entrance, she pressed the bundle into the hands of the old man. With choked voice, the old man thanked her and refused to take the bundle, but Sarah insisted and prevailed on him to take it since his daughter was a nursing mother and the journey was hard.

Sarah woke up in the morning after a restless sleep, interspersed

with nightmarish dreams. She put on her clothes quickly and walked in the direction of the school. It was about eight o'clock and she planned to tell the principal about Shmuel's absence. The morning was brightly beautiful. The earth emitted pleasant smells. In the nearby cottage a rooster crowed in its coop. At the end of the road, there appeared a horse-drawn carriage with its turning wheels shooting out muddy rain water. Cautiously, Sarah walked on the muddy hill and had to move aside to let the horse-drawn carriage pass.

"Hello, Sarah," the carriage driver, a freckle-nosed disbanded soldier, shouted, "Last night they had killed two infiltrators who were apparently disguised spies".

"Where?" asked Sarah.

"Near the olive orchard there—" and he pointed to the direction of the school.

The carriage moved away and as Sarah went on in the direction of the school, she was gripped by a feeling of unease whose origin she could not detect. Near the outer wall of the school, she saw a crowd. A bayonet attached to a gun shone. Her eyes fell on two corpses, with their mud-covered clothes, stretching on the damp ground. One of the corpses was of an old man with a gray beard and the other . . . Oh Lord! This is Hind and her father! Sarah hurriedly moved closer. Yes, this is Hind and this is her father! Hind was on her back with her eyes gazing at the sky and her arms folded as though she was clutching to something dear to her. Her clothes were bloodied. The old man was lying on his stomach with his gray beard covered with mud. He was still bleeding from a wound in his back; his blood oozing coloring the mud with red. From under his overcoat, there appeared a mud-covered bundle with an orange in it.

One of the onlookers knelt down, picked up the newspaper, removed the orange and shook off the bread crumbs from it and said, "A Hebrew newspaper! This means that they were leaving. The Jordanian intelligence will in vain await their return."

Another onlooker murmured something, started to walk away then returned and said, "How shameful! Cover them!"

"Where's the baby? They had a baby with them," shouted Sarah as she began to feel dizzy.

One of the onlookers who had red face and hooked nose, said, "And how did you know that they had a baby with them?"

Sarah was about to relate last night incident but she held back

at the last minute. She knelt down close the dead woman then stood up and said,

“She is a nursing mother, she must have had a baby, look at the milk oozing from her breast.”

After that Sarah could not stay at the scene any longer so she returned to the cottage totally overwhelmed by that tragic event.

In the late afternoon of the following day, Shmuel returned. He noticed his wife’s despondency and thought it might have something to do with his absence for two days. He tried but only after much effort and time did he manage to get her to cheer up.

As he was standing in front of the mirror to take his clothes off, he said,

“Did you hear about the two infiltrators who were killed near the village?”

“I did,” said Sarah.

Shmuel did not notice her paleness. Sarah walked up to the window and from behind the glass stared at the faraway horizon. She did not see the sky as it was decked with stars, nor the city lights twinkling in the western horizon. She did not hear the frogs croak in the pond nearby, nor her husband shout to her to prepare dinner.

What Sarah imagined at that moment was an Arab young man languishing in one of Israel’s prisons, perhaps eating his unappetizing dinner meal, or, perhaps, dreaming of the day when, out of prison, he could see his wife and his baby son—totally unaware that he would never see either one.

In her eyes the world turned dark. The image of the old man’s face, with his gray beard and two eyes glistening with tears welling up in them, filled the entire horizon.

Sarah never said a word to her husband about the incident of that ill-fated night. But from that time onwards, she refrained from reading her evening newspaper.

From his collection, *Azhār Bariyya* (Wild Flowers), Haifa, 1972, 82–89.

LITERARY CREATIVITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE:  
WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE ARAB PSYCHE SINCE  
THE SIXTIES? A STUDY IN A FEW LITERARY MASKS

MONA TAKIEDDINE AMYUNI

The eminent Spanish writer Juan Goytisolo narrates with humor the following tale: One of the most popular jugglers in Marrakesh used to hurry everyday to the Jemaa-el-Fna square and sit at the same place with a cage full of pigeons. People would crowd around him. He would open the cage and summon the male pigeons to fly, all together, straight on, to the top of the Maghreb Bank. The juggler would, then, sit and start a long conversation with the female pigeons, with questions and good counsel. The females would answer with much cooing. Well instructed with the duties and tricks of good wives, the females would, then, leave the cage and go hunting for their males, bringing them meekly back to the juggler's circle. Juan Goytisolo comments, ironically, that, one day, the juggler disappeared, while the training and discipline he used with his pigeons, remained in the memory of his audience. Indeed, they do remind us, Goytisolo adds, of the submission and "good" conduct of so many intellectuals who consider themselves "modern," or even "postmodern." Their minds set on success and prestige, those intellectuals quickly learn the trickster's lesson, behaving in a "correct" manner politically and in all other ways. Docile specimens of reductionist, hygienic therapies, they climb the social ladder, court rulers and people in power, and put their intellectual faculties at their service.

Goytisolo entitles his moral fable "On the Submission of the Intellectuals" and ends with the old saying: "It is better to be a bird of the woods, rather than a bird of the cage." And, with a controlled laughter, he imagines a Gustave Flaubert, for example, in deep contemplation of the domesticated pigeons of the Jemaa-el-Fna square!<sup>1</sup>

I came across this tale as I was selecting a few Arab authors who

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Goytisolo, "De la Soumission des Intellectuels; Pigeons Approvoises," in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Aout 1997): 25 (my translation).

would answer my starting question: what has happened to the Arab psyche since the sixties?

The authors I have chosen are undoubtedly representative of the post-colonial Arab world. They certainly are “birds of the woods,” for they function as the conscience of their people, and speak freely for all those who do not know how to speak.<sup>2</sup> Thus, they raise major issues in their societies, in the hope to awaken their rulers’ awareness, as well as that of the elites of the Arab world. They create literary masks, characters, who express their own vision of their societies, and, more broadly, of the human condition.

My essay claims, in no way, to answer fully the question I have asked in the title. The novels chosen here are strictly based on personal affinities, and do not exhaust the subject. They stand, however, at key periods since the sixties, and reflect shifting sensibilities and changing attitudes, as our century comes to a close. Deeply rooted in their own times, “worldly”, as Edward Said would say, they illustrate:

the connection between texts and the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies, and events. The realities of power and authority—as well as the resistances offered by men, women, and social movements to institutions, authorities and orthodoxies—are the realities that make texts possible, that deliver them to their readers, that solicit the attention of critics.<sup>3</sup>

My subject will be framed by al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ’s novel, *Season of Migration to the North* (1966)<sup>4</sup> which broke new grounds thematically and aesthetically, when it appeared in Beirut and, on the other hand, by what has been written about “Wounded Beirut,” during the cataclysm

<sup>2</sup> As Albert Camus expressed it in his Nobel Speech in 1957. (See *Discours de Suède*, Paris: Gallimard, 1958). See also Edward W. Said’s discussion of the intellectual’s function in society in *Representations of the Intellectual; the 1993 Reith Lectures* (Great Britain: Vintage, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, *Season of Migration to the North*, tr. Denys Johnson-Davies (Great Britain: Penguin, 1969, 1978), henceforth mentioned as *Season*, followed in parenthesis by the page reference; similarly for all other excerpts from the novels analyzed. *Season* first appeared in Arabic under the title *Mawsim al-Hijrā ilā al-Shamāl* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1969). See M.T. Amyuni, ed., *Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ’s Season of Migration to the North; a Casebook* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1985) which offers several different interpretations of the novel and an annotated bibliography; henceforth mentioned as *Casebook*.

of the Lebanese war (1975–1990),<sup>5</sup> and up to the present day. Enframed in this manner will come Najīb Maḥfūz' epic *Maḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh* (1977)<sup>6</sup> which brings to a climax a period of very gloomy writings by the eminent Egyptian author, made mainly of short stories and novels, with a very sharp bite, preceding and following the June 1967 catastrophe. Emile Habiby's (Imīl Ḥabībī) *The Secret Life of Sa'eed, the Pessoptimist* (1974)<sup>7</sup> will, then, be considered as the most brilliant and original rendering of the Arab plight under Zionism, leading most naturally (in a politico-historical sense) to the Lebanese war literature.

The authors I have selected for analysis have certainly not learned to stay coily in a cage, nor to fly to the frontispiece of the Bank and come back. They share the courage to denounce the vices of their societies in the hope that they would have functioned as "pestilential busy-bodies" in their own polis. They certainly take risks and have often been banned.<sup>8</sup> They also share a broad vision of humanity, and partake of a universal tradition in fiction.

Highly educated in at least two or three languages and cultures, these authors stand at the vanguard of their societies, far from the circles of power, but with their hands on the very pulse of their people. Open to the world at large, they carry their own heritage enriched

<sup>5</sup> I used the expression "Wounded Beirut" for the first time in F.J. Ghazoul and B. Harlow eds., *The View from Within; Writers and Critics on Contemporary Arabic Literature* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1994): 53–76.

<sup>6</sup> Najīb Maḥfūz, *Maḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1977). I am not aware of a translation of this epic. Roger Allen, however, translates the title as "The Epic of the Riffraff" in "Najīb Maḥfūz: Nobel Laureate in Literature, 1988", *World Literature Today; A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma* (Winter 1989): 5–9.

<sup>7</sup> Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Sa'eed the Pessoptimist*, tr. S.K. Jayyusi and T. Le Gassick (Cambridge, Mass. and Protá: Zed Books, 1985); the novel first appeared in Haifa in 1974. See the excellent introduction to the English text by Jayyusi for a synopsis of the novel, henceforward mentioned as the *Pessoptimist*. See on p. 12 how the word "pessoptimist", as coined by the author, merged "pessimism" and "optimism".

<sup>8</sup> The reference to the "busy body" is of course to Socrates who presents himself in this fashion to his polis, Athens, during his trial, hence his self-inflicted death; see Plato, "The Apology" in *The Last Days of Socrates* (England: Penguin Books, 1969): 45–76; Edward W. Said's books were recently censored in the Palestinian universities and bookstores; so were al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's books in Khartoum, while Maḥfūz had a narrow escape when stabbed in the back following his Nobel Prize Award. Emile Habiby (Imīl Ḥabībī), on the other hand, was violently criticized when he received the highest Israeli prize for literature. Many associations of Arab writers condemned his conduct and his acceptance of the Prize. Habiby never left Israel, was a member of the Communist party and of the Israeli Parliament for long. He recently passed away.

with the Western novelistic tradition. They have certainly read, as well, other great contemporary novelists from Africa, South America, and the Far East.

Which means that, technically as well as psychologically, they move freely in a literary world tradition while raising issues that specifically, if not uniquely, pertain to the Arab world. Consequently language and style are open to great experimentation and, if the reader has ample reason for disillusionment and despair, when exposed to so many social ills, he/she finds in compensation great reward in the way the Arabic novel has evolved in less than a hundred years.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the ironic mode is privileged by our authors. Irony creates ambiguity, satire, parody, allusion, wit, puns, reversals, exaggerations or, on the contrary, under-statements. It also leads to several levels of reading, as one plunges deeper and deeper into the multi-layered, multivocal narrations.<sup>10</sup>

Irony allows, as well, for duplication, *dedoublement*, or self-multiplication, as Paul de Man underlines in his study of Baudelaire's sense of the comic. Irony implies a *fall*, also a progression in self-knowledge: "The man who has fallen is somewhat wiser than the fool who walks around oblivious of the crack in the pavement about to trip him out." And de Man adds in his well-known essay "The Rhetoric of Fiction":

The movement of the ironic consciousness is anything but reassuring. . . . It may start with a casual bit of play with a stray loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture of the self is unraveled and comes apart.

Irony then runs its full course, gains momentum at an unsettling speed, exposes self-deception, pushing the self to "unrelieved vertigo," a dizziness to the point of madness.<sup>11</sup> Irony creates, as well, a distance

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel, an Historical and Critical Introduction* (Manchester: the University of Manchester, 1982); M.M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature and the West* (London: Ithaca Press, 1985); M. Beard and A. Haydar, ed., *Naḥīb Maḥfūz: From Regional Fame to Global Recognition* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1993); Issa Boullata, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature, 1945-1980* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1980); Halim Barakat, *The Arab World, Society, Culture and State* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993); etc.

<sup>10</sup> See Nabih Kanbar, "La Circulation de la Parole dans la Saison de migration vers le nord" in *Casebook*, op. cit.: 81-94; Roger Allen also mentions such *riwāyāt ṣawtiyya* (Vocal Novels), quoting Ḍiyā' al-Sharqāwī, in *The Arabic Novel*, op. cit.: 77.

<sup>11</sup> Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays on the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1983, 1993), 211-216.

between the author and his/her subject matter, while, simultaneously, author, personae, and reader merge undergoing this same process of self-revelation.

AL-ṬAYYIB ṢĀLIḤ'S *SEASON OF MIGRATION TO THE NORTH* (1966)

The Sudanese author's narrator in *Season* is seized by a "maddening dizziness," as he enters into Mustafa Sa'eed's secret room, towards the end of the novel. The slow ironic process of self-revelation reaches a climax here, and completely shatters the young man's psyche. Self-deception gives way to a moment of total lucidity:

The world has turned upside down. Love? Love does not do this [he says]. This is hatred. I feel hatred and seek revenge; my adversary is within and I needs must confront him (. . .) I begin from where Mustafa Sa'eed had left off (134).

The situation is totally reversed, for this is the same young man, freshly returned from a seven-year-stay in England, when the novel opens. He feels his heart is optimistic, with love flowing out to ripen and bear fruit (5). Back to his village in the northern part of Sudan, he compares himself to the palm tree standing in the courtyard of his home. Similar to its deep roots, he affirms he is a "being with a background, with roots, with a purpose" (2).

Yet, he meets Mustafa Sa'eed, quickly loses his bearings, and asks himself with deep anguish: "Was it likely that what happened to Mustafa Sa'eed could have happened to me? He had said he was a lie, so was I also a lie?" (49). Mustafa Sa'eed, had arrived to the village "five years ago, had bought himself a farm, built a house and married Mahmoud's daughter—a man who kept to himself and about whom not much was known" (2). Pushed, even cornered, by the narrator, Mustafa Sa'eed starts his confession, a tale of multiple disguises, masks, lies, and mad fantasies, with one only fateful date to pin him down to a specific time and place: "Born in Khartoum, 16 August 1898".<sup>12</sup> The rest of the tale is one of "Wanderlust", of germs, violence, and death, that the "stranger" spreads wherever he goes.

<sup>12</sup> At this exact date Kitchener invades Sudan, defeats and humiliates the nationalist hero Mahmoud Wad Ahmed. His distorted address to the latter (94) sets the tone for all the distorted discourses in the book, while the date of birth of Mustafa Sa'eed obviously presents him as the natural son of colonized Sudan.

Mustafa Sa'eed, in fact, stands for the colonized man who is torn apart between South and North, and reverses the rules of the colonizing game in a mock-heroic manner. In his turn, he goes up North, to the colonizer's own home, wanting to avenge the whole of Africa, all alone. A Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād of sorts, he plays out the fantasies of the young Arab man who goes North for higher education and sexual liberty. Ironically, as well, he mocks all the clichés that feed the Western imagination about the Black, Muslim man, inferior, oversexed, with a small brain.

Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ gives full reign to his use of irony, multiplies prowesses and games the Black and White act out and play at each other, in his desire to destroy all the romantic illusions writers and people, in general, had built up about the East/West or the South/North encounter. Ṣāliḥ breaks new grounds here by showing how cruel is the encounter, how dehumanizing it is for both parties involved. In this sense, Ṣāliḥ's novel is a landmark in World Letters and quickly became part of the canon in East and West, together with Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961),<sup>13</sup> and Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978),<sup>14</sup> whether the reader feels sympathy or antipathy towards any of those three books is besides the point. What is important is simply the need to read them, were it only for better self-knowledge and awareness of the Other.

Much has been said and written about *Season*.<sup>15</sup> Suffice it to mention, for the purpose of this essay, that Mustafa Sa'eed quickly disappears in the waters of the Nile, and the narrator takes over, being made custodian of wife, sons, and diaries. Irony runs full gear until that deadly moment when the narrator enters into Sa'eed's secret room. A "maddening dizziness" seizes him, as mentioned above. He looks at what he thought was Mustafa Sa'eed's portrait, only to realize he faced a mirror and looked at himself: "This is not Mustafa Sa'eed—it's a picture of me frowning at my face from a mirror" (135). His world turns upside down. He begins from where the older man had left off. Hatred supersedes every other feeling, and he realizes that his adversary was his own self which he had never confronted

<sup>13</sup> Franz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: Maspero, 1961).

<sup>14</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> See for example Muḥammadiyya, Aḥmad Sa'īd, ed., *Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ: 'Abqār al-Riwāya al-'Arabiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-'Awdā, 1976); see also the annotated bibliography of the *Casebook*.

before that drastic moment of self-revelation. "The entire texture of the self is [indeed] unraveled and comes apart,"<sup>16</sup> to borrow once more Paul de Man's study of irony.

What will Ṣāliḥ's narrator do with himself, following that terrible naked moment of complete self-elucidation? If the narrator is not given a name, I have maintained elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> it is because he simply stands for the young Sudanese man at the dawn of independence, but also for the young, educated Arab man of the early sixties, of the waning Nasserite euphoria, the Algerian victory, the beginning of the Palestinian resistance movement, a period of great expectations and many question marks.

Uncertain, hesitant, fearful, the narrator makes one only choice in the novel when he finds himself almost drowning in the Nile, following this drastic moment of self-confrontation. He throws himself in the Nile, is terribly tempted to let go "conscious and half-conscious" (167). Suddenly, he craves for a cigarette, craves for life, and makes a choice for the first time since he was born. He cries out for help, for he has a few duties to perform, he says, and a few people to love: "Like a comic actor shouting on a stage, I screamed with all my remaining strength, 'Help! Help'" (169).

Thus, with increasing irony, Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ strikes a final comic note. Self-mocking, a *ḥakawātī* in his own right, the narrator creates a stage to which he draws an audience—we, the gentlemen he addresses more than once in the novel.<sup>18</sup> He animates his stage with many people for whom he speaks in his own voice, being a "comic actor" himself. Those people report incredible stories about Mustafa Sa'eed. The narrator makes the latter invent even more astounding tales, which he reads for us from Sa'eed's diaries. The "farce" unfolds (p. 154), indeed, by "force and cunning."<sup>19</sup>

In this fashion, self-multiplication, *dedoublement*, is used building up a multivocal novel with a chopped up chronology, jazz-like episodes, echoes, refrains, and obsessive repetitions. The tale is pushed for-

<sup>16</sup> Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, 215.

<sup>17</sup> In an essay entitled "Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's *Season of Migration to the North*: an interpretation" in *Arab Studies Quarterly* II, 1 (Winter 1980): 1-18.

<sup>18</sup> See Nabil Matar, "Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's *Season*: Circles of Deceit" in *Casebook*, 113-122.

<sup>19</sup> See Edward W. Said's introduction to Halim Barakat, *Days of Dust*, tr. T. Le Gassick (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1983), ix-xxxiv, in which Said develops the ideas of scene, stage technique, and the episodic method in Arabic literature, ideas which recur in the novels I have analyzed.

ward by a wild poetic imagery of animal hunts, desert thirst, and incredible sexual prowess. Through flash-backs, the narrator's stories cover a hundred years of madness in the history of mankind, spanning Colonialism in the East, and two World Wars, crowned by Hiroshima and the creation of Israel.

Faced with this madness, shuttling between East and West, Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ chooses to end his novel on a comic note. He does not believe in Faustian types, nor in heroic ventures.<sup>20</sup> His is a Sufi sensibility which looks with deep compassion at man and the workings of history. Hence, the mock-heroism of Mustafa Sa'eed, set in sharp contrast to the common aspirations of the narrator. The latter unfolds "the farce" that entertains us (154), builds up suspense in the good *ḥakawātī* tradition. We do laugh, while, backstage, earnest implications accumulate, obliquely or quite clearly.

What will the educated narrator do with his experience in London when he goes back home? Will he find a place for himself, will he be able to serve his country, to raise a family and fulfil himself? What about the Arab woman as represented by Hosna?

Tragically, young men and women will be crushed by a worn-out patriarchal system that curbs their wills, and desires, from birth to death. Subtly, as we shall see further down with Najīb Maḥfūz, Ṣāliḥ links the corruption of rulers and their tyranny over the people to the patriarchal system.

Is this the reason why Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ did not go beyond the second volume of *Bandarshāh*<sup>21</sup> as he had planned? Is it because the search for the good ruler (*shāh*) who would build up the good city (*bandar*) reached a dead end in 1977? What of today? One would imagine Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's smiling ironically to hide his broken dreams.

#### NAJĪB MAḤFŪZ'S *MALḤAMAT AL-ḤARĀFISH* (1977)

Fully aware of so many social conflicts Maḥfūz had, well before Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, denounced them. With socratic irony, Maḥfūz accuses

<sup>20</sup> See *Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ Speaks: Four Interviews with the Sudanese Novelist*, ed. C.E. Berkley and O.H. Ahmed (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Cultural Counsellor, Embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Sudan "Sudanese Publication Series," 8, 1982, 32-34.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ, *Bandarshāh*, 2 vols., *Daww il-Bayt; Uḥdūtha 'an Kaww il Ab Ḍaḥīyya li-Abīh wa Banīh* (Beirut: Dār al-'Awda, 1971); *Maryūd* (Beirut: Dār al-'Awda, 1977);

the rulers of his nation of injustice, cruelty, and corruption. A black vision of the human condition is salvaged only by a wonderful sense of humor, and the extremely vivid characters Maḥfūz creates in his fiction.

*Malḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh* may be the bleakest in Maḥfūz's *opus*, but is certainly the closest to his heart, as he has often mentioned in interviews, together with his *Trilogy* (1956–57) and *Awlād Ḥārītā* (1958).<sup>22</sup> A magnificent prose epic, it dramatizes the life cycles of the *rifraff*, the “wretched of the earth”, rather than the heroes, the demi-gods of the Homeric tradition. It is as if, having seen it all, the Nasserite epoch and the downfall of the charismatic hero, the Sadat rule with its hopeless abuse of power and its corruption, the dire, irremediable misery of the people, Maḥfūz breaks away from the series of pessimistic short stories and novellas he wrote in the sixties and seventies. He picks up again the problems he tackled in his first epic *Awlād Ḥārītā*, abolishes the narrative present, brings down the ever recurring master/slave relationship to the level of the *futuwwas* of the alley, and creates in circular shape, the universal epic of the underdogs, those *ḥarāfīsh* towards whom Maḥfūz has always felt deep compassion.

Instead of recreating a satire of the secular and religious rulers in the world, as he had done in *Awlād Ḥārītā*, he dramatizes in *Malḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh* the mock-heroism of the small caids or *futuwwas* of the alley, this *ḥāra* which seems to encapsulate the microcosm at large. Thus, Maḥfūz ironically narrows down place and time to the extreme limits of community life, then he blows up his picture to incorporate the desert where Ashour goes ritualistically, prophet-like on a spiritual journey.

Biblical echoes, allusions to the endless stories of the *One Thousand and one Nights*, atavistic crimes of all sorts, primordial passions and hatreds, propel the epic back to the beginnings of time (*in illo tempore*),<sup>23</sup> and create so many myths. Witness the opening of the epic, for example:

At the fiery break of the day, in the narrow tunnel which leads from death to life, under the glimmering stars, at the sound of vibrant can-

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See my interpretation of this novel in *Tayeb Salih, Symbol of Culture*, ed. E.C. Berkley and M.T. Amyuni (forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the interview with Ahmed Ezzedine on the occasion of the Nobel award in *Arabies* (24 December 1988), 70–79.

<sup>23</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du Mythe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), 22, and elsewhere.

ticles, a song arose recounting the miseries and joys of our alley (5, my translation).

The plurals here, are echoed by a dramatic question repeated twice to enframe the eternal movement of nature set against human misery:

What is happening to our alley? Today is not like yesterday nor yesterday like the previous day. Something drastic has happened. Has it fallen down from the sky or has it exploded out of the entrails of the alley? And yet, the sun still rises and accomplishes its journey, and the night follows the day, and people go and come, and mysterious hymns are sung. What is happening to our alley? (50, my translation).

Highly poetic and dark, such passages forecast a kind of doomsday. Yet life goes on. In such a context, how would one reflect on the Arab psyche in the mid-seventies? Faced with so many disasters, Maḥfūz creates a magnificent epic and seems to fall in line with what Muṣṭafā Ḥijāzī says about societies like the Arab ones, which perpetuate the power of the patriarch, father or ruler. In such societies,

History is dormant, its movement stagnant, its time closed in, circular, ever recurrent. The more it repeats itself, the more it is considered as stable and laudable. In such situations where the sons do not rebel, do not even dream of rebelling (. . .) the image of the ruler, is constantly recreated (. . .), and the new age is once again despotic and perpetuates circular time rather than ascending history.<sup>24</sup>

Maḥfūz had well intuited the repercussions of the stiff patriarchal system very early in his career. Before adopting a circular pattern in his two great epics, he had given arresting examples of the impact of such a system on the young generations in his *Trilogy*.<sup>25</sup> He showed in the first volume *Bayn al-Qaṣrayn* (1956) how the father, the well-named Sayyed, dominates his wife and children with the exercise of oppression and coercion on all occasions. The children's state of fear and subordination is a source of rebellion for Kamāl, the boy who grows into an intellectual young man, bearing many features from Maḥfūz himself.

Kamāl's crisis is, actually, that of a whole generation of young

<sup>24</sup> See "Killing the Father or the Sons? The Dialectics of Stagnation or Change," *Mawāqif*, 70–71 (Winter-Spring, 1993): 53–64, in a special file on "Patriarchy in the Arab World" (my translation). By extension, Ḥijāzī interestingly links the Lebanese militias' power during the war to that system.

<sup>25</sup> Najīb Maḥfūz, *The Trilogy*, 3 vols., *Bayn al-Qaṣrayn*, *Al-Sukkariyya*, *Qaṣr al-Shawq* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1956, 1957).

Arab intellectuals who feel lost between high ideals and harsh realities, timeless customs, and changing social patterns. Kamāl did not have the courage to shake off his shoulders the burdens of the past, nor his father's adamant will-power. Aḥmad, his nephew, however, in *Al-Sukkariyya* (1956) the second volume of the *Trilogy*, reacts against the father's tyranny:

Paternity, he tells his uncle Kamāl, is like a brake-system which curbs and bridles our desires. What need, he adds, do we Egyptians, have of brakes, when all we do is walk with fettered feet? (205, my translation).

This image of a whole iron-cast population which walks with fettered feet, looms large over Maḥfūz's world, and fundamentally shakes the reader as it may still be valid today. Kamāl, like Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's narrator, is defeated in life while the intellectuals, at the present moment, seem quite lost in the Arab world. When they do not opt out "to fly low and come back to the cage," they feel frustrated and inadequate. A most dangerous gap between the people and the rulers in the Arab world, still speaks of a medieval system of values and laws.

Thus Ali Zay'our rightly remarks in his book *The Psychoanalysis of the Arab Self* that,

the family is relentless in its repression. [The child] is brought up to become an obedient youth, subservient to those above him—his father, older brother, clan chief, president;<sup>26</sup>

which applies to women, as well, in the Arab world, and as portrayed so often by Arab authors.

EMILE HABIBY'S *THE SECRET LIFE OF SA'ED*,  
*THE PESSOPTIMIST* (1974)

The *futuwwas* who play havoc in the land are the Israelis in Emile Habiby's philosophical (?) or moral (?) fable. In the wake of Voltaire's *Candide* which is often mentioned in the *Pessoptimist*, the restraint and

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<sup>26</sup> As quoted by Hisham Sharabi in *Neopatriarchy, a Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 41; the book brilliantly sheds light on a system in the Arab world which is totally anti-modern and curbs the youth, men and women, as witnessed in my discussion of Ṣāliḥ's and Maḥfūz's protagonists.

simplicity of the verbal treatment is admirable. Habiby never dwells too long on a point, laughs at what he says or comments, guffaws over the incidents he creates in very short episodes, vignettes-like, exaggerates or understates in a masterful use of irony. He also juxtaposes tragi-comic paragraphs, lyrical ones, farcical body postures, falls, triggering broad laughter (as seen above in the excerpts from Paul de Man), with amazing visual effects.

Actually the fable could be beautifully rendered on stage, echoing once more, Edward Said's remarks on this often used dramatic technique in Arabic literature. Thus, Sa'eed, for example, enters on stage riding a donkey which had saved him. He then falls down on the ground and finds himself in the military governor's car (14). When the narration starts, he is living with creatures in outer space "soaring with them" high above us (4). The tale, however, implies that Sa'eed, or his emissary, has fallen down to tell us his story, that of Palestinian men and women defeated and besieged by the Israeli enemy—a technique I have underlined in Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's *Season*, as well, while the last sight we have is of Sa'eed perched up high on a stake. He certainly can hardly keep his balance, clown-like!

Obviously, Habiby's anti-hero, Sa'eed, is a rogue, a fool, the eternal victim of events who thanks God, nevertheless, every time a calamity befalls him. It could have been worse, after all! A Palestinian author who never left his country, Habiby was in a unique position to study the psyche of the defeated, besieged Arab from within. He sharply satirizes not only Israeli's cruelty but also, the Arab's cowardice. A reverend man for example, tells Sa'eed:

That is the way you always are. When you can no longer endure your misery, yet you cannot bear to pay the high price you know is needed to change it, you come to me for help (...). What is it you lack? Is any one of you lacking a life he can offer, or lacking a death to make him fear for his life? (39).

Is it a tragedy or a farce, wonders Sa'eed a little later? (45).

But isn't this cowardice easy to understand now that the Arabs "have surrendered their power of thought to others"? And Sa'eed's accursed teacher adds that the Arabs "would first act and then dream, not as they do now—first dream then continue to dream" (30).

Similar to Beckett who chose the laughter rather than the tear in his tragi-comedy *Waiting for Godot*, poignant statements pierce into the comic façade and Sa'eed confesses:

I lived in the outside world—outside the tunnels that is—for twenty years, unable to breathe no matter how I tried, like a man who is drowning. But I did not die. (76).

Sa'eed, like Šāliḥ's narrator, did survive by "force and cunning", a comic actor for sure! But "the catastrophes of war and dispossession" (79) are never too far from the narration.

Similar to Shakespearean fools who reiterate deep truths in a matter-of-fact tone, Sa'eed knows Shakespeare by heart. He recites from Shakespeare in prison, and talks about Othello and Desdemona (129). Does this stand as a subtle caricature of the Arab intellectuals in general, who are absolutely inept<sup>27</sup> (at least in the literature presented here)? In prison, Sa'eed is punched and kicked savagely by the Israeli wardens. He rolls around at their feet, they boot him and trample him altogether. Then comes this savage, seemingly innocent sentence, in the same scene where Sa'eed finds himself in "The Midst of an Arabian-Shakespearean Poetry Circle" as the episode is entitled:

I screamed but could hear nothing, just stifled noises coming from the beating, kicking and punching. Then I could no longer feel the blows but could only sense them faintly, as if they came from somewhere far away. They had stopped repeating verse from Shakespeare and were concentrating on the poetry of sighs and moans . . . (130);

an arresting example of Habiby's technique. A parody of Israeli savagery and the pathetic Arab man's plight, is created, here, in the most neutral tone.

A younger generation of Palestinian fighters, however, seems to have far more courage and dignity than Sa'eed, the pessoptimist. The second Yuaad, her brother Sa'eed, and the pessoptimist's own son, rebel and try to fight back. The second Yuaad (coming back) represents the new Arab woman fighter who has the guts to tell the enemy:

You have a phrase "from the cradle to the grave"; we have one that goes, "from cordon to cordon!" Don't expect those living their entire lives within cordons, under constant inspection, at the mercy of every kind of blood-hound deprived of their very roots, to have much sympathy with your particular calamity when it had become the life experience of a whole nation, from the Gulf to the Atlantic! (142).<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See Edward W. Said's introduction to Halim Barakat's *Days of Dust*, xxix.

<sup>28</sup> "From the cradle to the grave" echoes the deeply anguished speech of Vladimir

Sa'eed's son, like the second Yuaad, is a fighter, a Fedā'ī. He dies together with his mother, following a heroic speech about resistance and future victory. Unhappily we haven't seen it yet! The Lebanese war prolonged the agony and the Arab psyche still suffers the pain.

Self-expression, nevertheless, seems to have acquired a beautiful sense of liberation, as witnessed in the accomplished aesthetic dimension of the three novels analyzed so far.

### THE LITERATURE OF "WOUNDED" BEIRUT

In a well-known essay where he bids good-bye to Maḥfūz, Edward Said creates a contrast, which is highly relevant to my argument, between the Egyptian author and the Palestinian or Lebanese one. The thing about Maḥfūz, says Said, is that he has always been able to depend on the stability of the Egyptian society, independently of all the political upheavals of the times: "... throughout all the turbulence of the country's wars, revolutions and social upheavals, civil society was never eclipsed, its identity was never in doubt, was never completely absorbed into the state." In some other Arab countries, Said adds, "you cannot leave your house and suppose that when and if you return it will be as you left it." You can no longer take for granted any of the institutions that normally would regulate your life and give you security. Said takes Habiby's *Pessoptimist* and Elias Khoury's *Little Mountain* (1977), as examples of what he means, the first being "a carnivalesque explosion of parody and theatrical farce," the second "replicates in its own brand of formlessness some of Khoury's life" (exile, fights, disasters, massacres lived and witnessed during the Lebanese war):

Khoury, along with Mahmoud Darwish, is an artist who gives voice to rooted exiles and the plight of the trapped refugee, to dissolving boundaries and changing identities, to radical demands and new languages. From this perspective Khoury's work bids Maḥfūz an inevitable and yet profoundly respectable farewell.<sup>29</sup>

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who says at the end of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: "Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! (...) They give birth astride of a grave (...)", repeated a little later: "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth..." (The absurdity of the human condition hits Habiby as much as Beckett) in Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956, 1971), 94-95.

<sup>29</sup> "Goodbye to Maḥfūz," *London Review of Books* (8 December 1988): 10-11; later

A fractured reality, indeed, haunts Khoury's personae, and is rendered through a similarly broken down style. The only reality, the author affirms, is made of endless stories one creates (to while away the time, would say the Beckettian anti-hero). The rest totally escapes one's grip. These chopped-up stories are like "the mirrors of a broken reality," and a basic question is posed in all of Khoury's fiction: How can literature weave the language of our troubled epoch out of the mirrors of a broken reality?<sup>30</sup>

A few examples chosen at random from Khoury's fiction will illustrate the way a new type of writing has taken shape in Lebanon since the mid-seventies:

Is the mountain slipping? (...) The mountain isn't slipping (...) We feared for the mountain (...) It edged to the brink of Beirut sinking into it (*Little Mountain*: 1-18).

The mountain represents here Khoury's whole childhood, shipwrecked at the beginning of the war. Follows a scene where militiamen enter Khoury's home looking for him (as it actually happened to him):

They enter, they search (...) I wasn't there (...) I wasn't there. My mother was there (...) I wasn't there. My mother was there (...) She sat on a chair guarding her house as they, inside, tore up papers and memories. She sat on a chair... (*Little Mountain*: 4-5).

Still later, comes a carnage scene in a Dantesque city:

Black metal devouring me: roadblocks, they say. I see my face tumbling to the ground. Black metal devouring me: my voice slips down alone and stretches to where the corpses of my friends lie buried in mass graves. Black metal devouring me: the raised hands do not wave banners, they clutch death. Metal on the street, terror and empty gas-bottles, corpses and smuggled cigarette cartons. The moment of victory has come. The moment of death has come. War has come. And my mother shakes her dead and tells me about the poor (*Little Mountain*: 14).

And elsewhere, questions arise often asked by other writers during the long war years. Khoury says desperately at one point in *Little*

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reprinted as a foreword to the English translation of *al-Jabal al-Saghīr* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Abhāth al-'Arabiyya, 1977), *Little Mountain*, tr. Maia Tabet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), ix-xxi.

<sup>30</sup> In a recent lecture Khoury gave at Columbia University, USA, on the Third-World novel, reproduced in *al-Mulhaq*, the literary supplement of the daily *an-Nahār*, which Khoury directs (220-221, May 25-June 1, 1996): 18-19 and 19-20.

*Mountain*: “I cannot live like this, fragmented in the air” (143). Yet he carries on, wondering:

What shall I write? Where is the flow in the story? It is impossible to write Maryam’s story, not because I loved her, but because I see her in front of me trembling with fear, as we walk across the green line which divided Beirut against itself. And I repeat the names. I reach 99 names. I reach the ultimate number and repeat the names of all the friends who fell on the stones of that bloody line drawn by the war (*Kingdom*: 63, my translation).

The stones allude, as well, to the Palestinian tragedy, as do many references, in *The Kingdom of the Strangers* (1993)<sup>31</sup> to the Sabra and Shatila massacres. What happens to writing in such a bloody epoch? “We write, says Khoury, which means we lie”:

Maryam thought I only looked for the truth so that I could translate it into a text. And when I would write the story I would betray the truth (*Kingdom*: 64, my translation).

“You writers,” says Maryam, “only love illusion, only love to write about love.” In that state of illusion where reality constantly slips away, the writer creates fragments of stories, stories within stories, artificially linked by very thin threads, or not linked at all, just to fill in empty spaces, in “a disintegrating prose” as Edward Said describes it.

If Elias Khoury wonders what to write about since he feels “speech is disintegrating and dying out,” I feel, myself, quite unable to do justice to a rich literature that has been written since 1975 in Beirut. The space left for me, here, allows only for a bird’s eye view of this new body of works. I would hope, however, to stimulate further reading into this recent literature.<sup>32</sup>

Of Khoury’s generation, Rashīd al-Ḍaʿīf leads with him the novelistic

<sup>31</sup> Elias Khoury, *Mamlakat al-Ghurabāʾ* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> See also M.T. Amyuni, “Style as Politics in the Poems and Novels of Rashīd al-Ḍaʿīf”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (28, 2, May 1996): 177–192; “Between Reality and Myth: Elias Khoury’s Wounded Beirut,” in *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature*, eds. Neuwirth, Seekamp, Gunter, Jarrar (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, BT 64, 1996); “Abdo Wazen’s *Garden of the Senses*, An Analysis,” *The Beirut Review* (7, spring 1994): 145–152; “A Panorama of Lebanese Women’s Writings: 1975–1995,” in *Women and War: Lebanon, a Case Study*, ed. Lamia Rustum Shehadeh (Florida: University Press, 1999); Mona Amyuni, “Literature and War, Beirut 1993–1995”, *World Literature Today*, 73, 1 (Winter 1999): 37–42.

scene, with the regular publication of novels and collections of poetry since the late seventies. He significantly said in an interview<sup>33</sup> that the Lebanese war revealed man to him, showed him that there was no end to evil in the world. War stripped men, al-Ḍaʿīf added, of all pretenses. Hence, his use of a language stripped to its bare essentials, as well, in his desire to forget *luḡhat al-Dād*, the classical Arabic language.

Al-Ḍaʿīf's novels are varied in subject-matter, play with different themes and styles, in an original and accomplished technique. Together with Elias Khoury, Rashīd al-Ḍaʿīf's fiction mirrors the whole spectrum of emotions that grip human beings when subjected to shelling, kidnapping, or simply death. Kafkaesque, absurd, obsessional, or on the contrary, mischievous and funny, they reduce human beings to basic impulses and techniques for survival, rather than any higher aspiration. Irony, self-depreciation, and parody rule here as was the case with Elias Khoury, and the tragic vein is ever present as in the following passage:

I remember all that happened to me, in me, and around me except for the bomb that fell down, exploded, destroyed so much around it. It all started with a very sharp pain in the area around my right shoulder, and I tried to bear it expecting it to disappear, and I waited for the pain to decrease (. . .) but it increased and became unbearable, so I fell down on the road near the sidewalk, not too far from the public sewers (. . .) And the pain kept increasing. And I felt my arm had left me, had jumped far away from me, so I ran after it, but I was wounded, and my wound was deep. I threw myself again on the ground, and my arm came back to me after it had gone beyond the point of panic. And my blood flowed abundantly on the asphalt (. . .) And it ran on the side of the road towards the public sewers, and disappeared in their blackness, and the rats stirred, and came out and started to lick it. . . . That rats should lick my arm hurt me deeply. That rats should reach my arm before anybody else.<sup>34</sup>

This horrible scene recurs in a nightmarish atmosphere.

The younger artists writing today in Beirut, grew up in that atmosphere and in a deeply fragmented country. The sense of loss, fragmentation, and despair is reflected in the novels of Hoda Barakat,

<sup>33</sup> See *Les Cahiers de l'Orient; Revue d'Etude et de Reflexion sur le Liban et le Monde Arabe* (III, 15, 1989): 147–169 (a special file on al-Ḍaʿīf).

<sup>34</sup> Rashīd al-Ḍaʿīf, *Fuṣḥa Mustahdafa bayn al-Nuʿās wa l-Nawm* (Trapped between Drowsiness and Sleep), (Beirut: Mukhtārāt, 1986), 54 (this central scene recurs in different scenarios in the novel; my translation).

Renée Hayek, Abdo Wazen, Sabah al-Kharrat Zueyn, Hanan al-Shaykh, and Rabih Jaber amongst others. There are deep ruptures within the self, between self and others, self and society, self and reality at large. The ironic mode alleviates perhaps the closeness of reality and fiction, and the “maddening dizziness” of self-elucidation.

Moreover the deep ruptures are expressed through a fragmented style, the impossibility of dialogue, of any communication. The world is deaf and mute. An interior chopped-up monologue plunges the mute voice in a primitive darkness, and a primordial solitude. Images of dispersion, dismemberment, and fragmentation recur in the midst of the shambles of a city. “I did not find the meaning” says Zueyn’s narrator, for example. Words fail her, chaos usurps her space, her soul escapes her body, yet she comes back everyday “committing the sin of writing,” while writing breaks down continuously under her pen:

I did not find the meaning . . . our things in our death ended taking us unawares, no memory of a city, our souls escaped our bodies, our bodies washed away our sins, but I came back every day committing the sin of writing, and every day I wished I were dead, I wished to abolish the abyss from which I came.<sup>35</sup>

On the positive side, stands this ability to write about the impossibility of writing itself. The Arabic language reaches amazing new horizons, to express a new type of sensibility coming of age at the end of our century. In the wake of constant technical experimentation, many taboos have collapsed. There is no more concern, in this new literature, for the patriarchal power, and no more room for gender differences amongst our writers. I would challenge the reader to guess whether the author of *The Stone of Laughter*<sup>36</sup> or *Al-Bayt al-Māʿil wa l-Waqt wa l-Ḥitān* is male or female. A new sense of freedom is thus reclaimed, paradoxically, in the midst of the debris of Beirut. A new victory is won over by our foremost writers, in spite of the marginalization of the “birds of the woods,” Goytisolo praises.

<sup>35</sup> Ṣabāḥ al-Kharrāt Zueyn, *Al-Bayt al-Māʿil wa l-Waqt wa al-Judrān* (The Oblique House and Time and the Walls, Beirut: Dār Amwāj, 1995): 96, my translation.

<sup>36</sup> Hoda Barakat, *The Stone of Laughter*, tr. Sophie Bennett (New York: Interlink Books, 1995). The original Arabic title is *Hajar al-Duḥk* (London: Riad el-Rayess Books, 1990) awarded *al-Nāqid* prize for a first novel that same year. I analyze her second novel *Ahl al-Hawā* (Of Wind and Love), (Beirut: Dār an-Nahār, 1993) in the above mentioned essay “Literature ans War . . .”

## CONCLUSION

Our quest for the modern Arab psyche through drastic events since the sixties has revealed changing “clusters of feelings”<sup>37</sup> reacting to such events. The one hundred-year-period covered in *Season*, shuttling between East and West jumped out of space and time, to the ever recurring history of man since times immemorial in *Malḥamat al-Ḥarāfīsh*. History with Emile Habiby, however, dramatically creates a deep chasm between the Palestine before 1949 and Israeli domination since, enslaving the Arab psyche in a horrid way.

With the literature of “Wounded Beirut,” the spacio-temporal units are slowly reduced to the individual consciousness of the writer, bent on itself, while ironically, this self is anonymous and revolves in a haunted place. One hardly finds any physical description, any history, any personal identity or name. All points of reference have disappeared—father, mother, family, community, ruler, ideology—nothing resisted the tidal wave breaking in 1975.

Fear, loss, despair, and dispossession seize the psyche, while the literary project is still in the making in “Wounded Beirut”. No recent novel, yet, stands on a par with *Season*, or the *Pessoptimist*, or any of the great novels of Maḥfūz.

Let me admit, in conclusion, that it is hard to end on such a pessimistic note. What redeems it, however, is the long course Arab man and woman have run since the narrator’s self-deceit at the beginning of *Season*. Ṣālīḥ’s narrator learned the tough lesson of exposure. You do not go “north” and remain the same. Ironically, the broader the exposure, the richer, but also, the more vulnerable one is. The Arab intellectual, today, is in a very difficult plight, if he/she refused to be tamed by the tricksters of the world. And even when his/her world is faring quite badly.

Yet, the most distinguished Arab writers bear the torch, and show the way: it is difficult but not impossible. Irony, parody, and self-mockery have shaken us up into a new level of awareness and maturity. With both comes a renewed reinvigoration of the Arab psyche which refuses any complacency.

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<sup>37</sup> This rich metaphor recurs in Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

GOING BEYOND SOCIALIST REALISM, GETTING  
NOWHERE: LUWĪS 'AWAḌ'S CROSS-CULTURAL  
ENCOUNTER WITH THE OTHER

ABDUL-NABI ISSTAIF

Luwīs 'AwaḌ's *al-Ishṭirākīyya wa l-Adab*<sup>1</sup> (Socialism and Literature) in which he expounds his call for "Literature for Life's Sake" appeared first in Beirut in 1963 at the time when Egypt was passing through socialist transformation.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this book, which is probably one of the most important theoretical statements on the social function of literature by a Marxist-inspired Arab critic, was, in fact, the culmination of 'AwaḌ's life-long engagement with socialist thought in general and socialist-inspired critical theory in particular—an engagement which was closely connected with his complex cultural formation in both Egypt and abroad (Cambridge and Princeton in particular) as well as with the political, economic, social and cultural changes that have taken place in Egypt in the twentieth century.

Notwithstanding the importance of 'AwaḌ's other contributions to modern Arabic literary criticism which have received considerable attention<sup>3</sup> this book merits a detailed consideration on the ground of its author's undisputed status in the history of modern Arabic literature<sup>4</sup> as well as for the light it sheds on the way a modern Arab

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<sup>1</sup> Luwīs 'AwaḌ, *al-Ishṭirākīyya wa l-Adab* (Beirut: Dār al-Adab, 1963). Henceforth *Socialism and Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> See John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes* (Princeton University Press Princeton, 1983), 432–34.

<sup>3</sup> See Muḥammad Mandūr, *al-Naqd wa al-Nuqqād al-Mu'āṣirūn* (Cairo: Dār Nahdat Miṣr, n.d.), 196–215; Ḥusayn Muruwwah, *Dirāsāt Naqdiyya fī Daw' al-Minhāj al-Wāqī'i* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1965), 59–141; Ghālī Shukrī, *Mādhā Aḏāfū ilā Damūr al-ʿAṣr* (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-ʿArabī, 1968), 166–70; Jalāl al-ʿAshrī, *Thaqāfatunā bayn al-Aṣāla wa al-Mu'āṣara* (Cairo, 1971) 87–109; Ḥannā 'Abbūd, *al-Madrasa al-Wāqī'iyya fī al-Naqd al-ʿArabī al-Hadīth* (Damascus: Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, 1978), 157–67; 'Abd al-Mun'im Tallīmah, "Taṣawwur al-Tārīkh al-Adabī fī Kitābāt Luwīs 'AwaḌ," *Adab wa Naqd* (Cairo) 57 (May, 1990): 12–24; Sayyid al-Baḥrāwī "Luwīs 'AwaḌ, Taliqan," *Ibid.*, 33–41; Shukrī Muḥammad 'Ayyād, "Luwīs 'AwaḌ wa l-Adab al-Ishṭirākī" *al-Hilāl* (Cairo) 98 (October 1990): 38–43; and Jābir 'Uṣfūr, "Dr. Luwīs 'AwaḌ, Nāqidan: Min Muḥammad Mandūr ilā Luwīs 'AwaḌ" *Ibid.*, 50–58.

<sup>4</sup> For more details on 'AwaḌ's contribution to modern Arab culture see M.R.

critic responds to the various internal changes in his society by drawing on certain elements of his cultural formation and employing them in formulating his notions and views about the process of literary production in this society. It is hoped that tracing the genesis of 'Awaḍ's call and contextualizing his views on its various constituents articulated over almost two decades, would also shed much needed light on some aspects of Egypt's cultural encounter with the other since the 1930s.

'Awaḍ owed his earliest acquaintance with socialist ideas in the 1930s to al-'Aqqād, who first introduced the idea of socialism to 'Awaḍ's generation<sup>5</sup> and to Salāma Mūsā who was particularly interested in the social function of literature and who also called on the Egyptian writer to abandon his ivory tower and share the life and fate of his people.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the impact of Mūsā's progressive review *al-Majalla al-Jadīda* (*The New Journal*, 1924–1930 and 1934–42), in which he advocated the ideas and ideals of the Fabian Society and called for a literature which reflects and helps to modify social reality, 'Awaḍ was affected by Mūsā's interest in the language of the people and literature.<sup>7</sup> There is no doubt that his use of Egyptian colloquial in some of his experimental poetry in *Blūtūland wa Qasā'id Ukhra* (*Plutoland and Other Poems*, 1947) and in his autobiographical work *Mudhakkirāt Ṭālib Ba'tha* (*Memoirs of an Egyptian Scholar*, 1965), was a direct

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Khouri, "Luwīs 'Awaḍ: A Forgotten Pioneer of the Free Verse Movement," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 1 (1970): 137–44; Hilary Kilpatrick, *The Modern Egyptian Novel* (London: Ithaca Press, 1982), 65–71; Muhammad Abdul-Hai, *Tradition and English and American Influence in Arabic Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca Press, London, 1982), 225–37; Ali B. Jad, *Form and Technique in the Egyptian Novel: 1919–1971* (Ithaca Press, London, 1983), 157–60; Marina Stagh, *The Limits of Freedom of Speech: Prose Literature and Prose Writers in Egypt Under Nasser and Sadat* (Almqvist and Wiksell International, Stockholm, 1993), 227–90; Ghālī Shukrī, *Thawrat al-Fikr fī Adabīnā al-Hadīth* (Maktabat al-Anglū al-Miṣriyya, Cairo, 1965), 5–52; Maḥmūd Amīn al-'Ālim, *al-Insān Mawqif*, 2nd Edition, (Qaḍāyā Fikriyya, Cairo, 1994), 247–56; *Adab wa Naqd* 57 (May 1990) a special issue devoted to L. 'Awaḍ; 'Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mu'tī Hījāzī et al., *Luwīs 'Awaḍ: Mufakkiran wa Nāqidan wa Mubdi'an* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmma li al-Kitāb, 1990); Ḥilmī Muḥammad al-Qā'ūd, *Luwīs 'Awaḍ: al-Uṣṭūra wa al-Ḥaqīqa* (Cairo: Dār al-I'tisām, 1994) and Nasīm Mijallī, *Luwīs 'Awaḍ wa Ma'ārikuh al-Adabiyya* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmma li l-Kitāb, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> For more details see Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *Maqālāt fī al-Naqd wa l-Adab* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Anglū al-Miṣriyya, 1965), 91–102.

<sup>6</sup> Ghālī Shukrī, *Salāma Mūsā wa Azmat al-Ḍamīr al-'Arabī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khanjī, 1962), 249–300.

<sup>7</sup> M.M. Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 205.

result of Mūsā's influence, although 'Awaḍ acknowledges in his preface to his *Memoirs*, that the problem of writing in the colloquial is more vital for the creative writer than for him as a critic, scholar or university teacher.<sup>8</sup>

Marxism was also part of 'Awaḍ's undergraduate syllabus at the Department of English of the University of Fu'ād 1st (now Cairo) and this had further consolidated his interest in socialist thought—an interest which was also stimulated by his Cambridge experience at Kings College between 1937 and 1940.

Returning to Egypt by sea, via South Africa, 'Awaḍ was particularly active in disseminating Marxist thought throughout the 1940s, publishing articles, books, translations and creative writings, all clearly touched by Marxism in one way or another. First, there were his influential articles on modern English literature, published in *al-Kātib al-Miṣrī (the Egyptian Scribe)* between 1945 and 1946 and later collected and published in a book entitled *Fī al-Adab al-Injīlīzī al-Hadīth (On Modern English Literature, 1950)*, in which he put forward a clearly Marxist interpretation of literature inspired by certain Marxist critics such as C. Day-Lewis and others.<sup>9</sup>

Later came his translation of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in 1947, with an extended introduction in which he adopted the same Marxist approach, influenced this time by Fisher and C. Caudwell.<sup>10</sup> In the same year, 'Awaḍ published his *Plutoland and Other Poems*, with its revolutionary introduction "Ḥaṭṭimū 'Amūd al-Shi'r" (Demolish the Poetic Tradition) in which he declared that "since he was slaughtered by Karl Marx" he "no longer sees of the myriad colours of life and death any but one colour: before his eyes the green grass has turned red, the skies red, the sandy desert and the blue waters red. Scarlet have become all women, the words of men, abstract ideas; all are the colour of blood. Even sounds and odours and tastes have all become red as though the whole universe is being consumed by a hellish fire. He is contended to live in this hellish fire, for he has seen chains lacerating the bodies of slaves (sic) cannot think of anything except red liberty".<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *Mudhakkirāt Ṭālib Bā'tha* (Cairo: Rūz al-Yuṣuf, 1965), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Abdul-Hai, *Tradition and English and American Influence in Arabic Romantic Poetry*, 226.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 228–30, and Muhammad Abdul-Hai, "Shelley and the Arabs" *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 3, 1971, 80.

<sup>11</sup> *The Literature of Ideas in Egypt*, part 1, Selection Translation and Introductions

Early in the 1950s, 'Awaḍ was appointed by the new regime literary editor of *al-Jumhūriyya* (The Republic), the mouth piece of the July Revolution, a move which was interpreted by 'Awaḍ himself as a concrete indication of the Revolution's concern for the new literature. Acting quickly to fill in what he described later as a dreadful vacuum in the literary life of Egypt since 1936, which witnessed the bankruptcy of liberal democracy in the political sphere, 'Awaḍ chose "al-Adab fī Sabīl al-Ḥayāt" (Literature for Life's Sake) as a motto for the literary page, generating a healthy climate for serious discussions of the various implications of this relationship between literature and life.

Siding against his former teacher Ṭāhā Ḥusayn who led the opponents of this call, 'Awaḍ, together with 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Yūnus, Muḥammad Mandūr, 'Abd al-'Aẓīm Anīs, Maḥmūd Amīn al-'Ālim, Ṣalāḥ Ḥāfīz, Luṭfī al-Khulī, 'Abd al-Mun'īm Murād, Ismā'īl Mazḥar and others, stood firmly defending a closer relationship between literature and life than Ḥusayn's camp would have approved of.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, this did not prevent him and his close friend Mandūr from expressing their reservation about Anīs and al-'Ālim's narrow and limited understanding of commitment and the so-called *al-Adab al-Hādīf* (the purposive literature). According to 'Awaḍ, who always felt that literature can never exist unless it is articulated in an artistic form, Anīs and al-'Ālim were too dogmatic and had gone, in fact, too far in their subordination of literature to life. Mandūr went even further in his objection to Anīs and al-'Ālim and modified their motto, that is, the purposive literature into "the shouting literature" (al-'Adab al-Hāṭif) by substituting the (tā') for the (dāl).<sup>13</sup>

During the late 1950s and the early 1960s, 'Awaḍ wrote several series of articles which were published in *al-Sha'b* (*The People*), between 1957 and 1958, *al-Jumhūriyya*, between 1960 and 1961 and *al-Ahrām* between 1962 and 1963. Most of these articles were collected and published in a book under the title *Maqālāt fī l-Naqd wa l-Adab* (*Essays on Criticism and Literature*, 1965). Introducing them, 'Awaḍ writes that what unifies these articles is "the permanent link between literature,

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by Louis 'Awaḍ (Scholars Free, Atlanta-Georgia, 1986), 225; Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *Blūtūlānd wa Qasā'id Ukhra' Min Shi'r al-Khāssa*, 2nd Edition (Cairo: al-Ḥay'a al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmma li l-Kitāb, 1989), 26-7 and also his "Afterword" entitled "Ba'd Niṣf Qarn" (After half a century) in *Ibid.*, 131-50.

<sup>12</sup> Nasīm Mijallī, *Luwīs 'Awaḍ wa Ma'ārikuh al-Adabiyya*, 105-49.

<sup>13</sup> Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *al-Thawra wa l-Adab* (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-'Arabī, 1967), 160.

art or thought and the society which produces it". For 'Awaḍ believes in the organic relationship between society and what it produces of literature, art or thought, without lessening the importance of the cultural formation of individual in the artist or thinker.

Understanding the word society in its broadest sense, in which the spirit of the age as a whole as well as that of humanity embraces the soul of the society with its spatial and temporal boundaries, 'Awaḍ always prefers to talk about the organic relationship between literature and life. For life is far more general and comprehensive than society. It can accommodate the intertwined existence of both the individual and the social, the overlapping national and human existence, the past and its legacy, the present and its burdens and the future and its dreams, all combined in one.<sup>14</sup>

In the first part of the book which he entitles "On Literature and Society" 'Awaḍ discusses various intellectual figures such as the great Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn, Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, al-'Aqqād, Salāma Mūsā, Shafīq Ghurbāl, 'Abd al-Laṭīf Aḥmad, Muḥammad Mufīd al-Shūbāshī and Aḥmad Rushdī Ṣāliḥ, as well as the question of socialist culture. Highlighting the contribution of these figures to Arab culture, he stresses the relationship between their writing and society. Thus in an article entitled, "A new meaning of realism",<sup>15</sup> he expresses his reservation about al-Shūbāshī's understanding of Belinsky's criticism, particularly what al-Shūbāshī claims to be Belinsky's hostile attitude towards the misleading Western literature (*al-adāb al-gharbiyya al-muḍallīla*). While acknowledging al-Shūbāshī's contribution to the realistic movement in Egypt and strongly supporting his call for realism, 'Awaḍ rejects his appeal to resist Western literature. Belinsky never called for such a resistance, 'Awaḍ adds, and it is unjustifiable on any ground unless al-Shūbāshī specifies which of these literatures is truly misleading and why. Furthermore, it was not, in fact, Belinsky who was hostile to Western literature, but rather his opponents, namely the supporters of Slavic nationalism.

In another article entitled, "On Folk Literature"<sup>16</sup> 'Awaḍ commends Aḥmad Rushdī Ṣāliḥ's book *al-Adab al-Sha'bi* (*Folk Literature*) for the new horizons which it explores and makes available to the students of folklore and folk literature. Having started from the

<sup>14</sup> Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *Maqālāt fī l-Naqd wa l-Adab*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 133–43.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 145–54.

particular and the specific rather than the general, states 'Awad, Ṣāliḥ collected his own materials, thoroughly studied them and reached certain conclusions which one can easily agree with. Ṣāliḥ, 'Awaḍ continues, has demonstrated by concrete and conclusive evidence rather than by assumption and sheer argument that, "We, in Egypt, have a very serious folk literature."

Recalling his defense of folk literature and his early call for developing and studying it in his introduction to his *Phutoland and Other Poems*, 'Awaḍ refers, in this context, to his attempts during the 1940s to carry out such a study and his subsequent realization that only specialists working within a special institute for the study of folklore can carry out his ambitious project. Hence 'Awaḍ's admiration for Ṣāliḥ's work despite the fact that it was confined to a very limited area. Ṣāliḥ, in 'Awaḍ's view, tried to extract out of the many folk poems he collected a picture of the Egyptian conscience, sentiment, way of thinking and convention that have been handed down from one generation to another through the various forms of Egyptian folk literature. 'Awaḍ, however, criticizes Ṣāliḥ for not sufficiently stressing the connection of certain rituals to the ancient religion of Egypt.

Folk literature was, in fact, at the centre of 'Awaḍ's views on socialist culture as outlined in his two articles entitled "On Socialist Culture: I and II".

In the first article<sup>17</sup> 'Awaḍ, greets "the great president" 'Abd al-Nāṣir who acknowledged, in his speech at Alexandria University, the role of the Egyptian intellectuals not only in preparing the ground for the 1952 Revolution but also in building the new socialist society.

Stressing the fact that the intellectual needs to have a socialist mentality and morality if he is to become a true socialist, 'Awaḍ acknowledges that building culture is a long and difficult process in view of the cultural division which separates the formal (*al-rasmī*) tradition from its popular (*al-sha'bi*) counterpart. 'Awaḍ, believes that there is a need not only to recognize the popular tradition but also to acquaint the people with the high tradition of both classical Arabic and world literatures. "Thus if the elite recognizes the literature and art of the people and if the literature and art of the elite are made available to the people, the present gap between the elite and the masses can be bridged. The popular tradition will be influenced by the beauty of the high tradition which, in turn, will be affected by

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 155–65.

the sentiment of popular literature. The language of the masses (*al-‘amma*) will be polished by the language of the elite which will adapt from the language of the masses all its sincerity and flexibility. Out of all of this we can create a society not of one culture but rather a society of a homogeneous and leveled culture in both form and content”<sup>17a</sup>.

‘Awaḍ elaborates his views on creating a socialist culture further when he discusses<sup>18</sup> a public lecture entitled “Culture in the Socialist Society” delivered by the Egyptian Minister of Culture, Dr. ‘Abd al-Qādir Ḥātim.

Highlighting the importance of the question addressed by the Minister, namely how a cultural revolution guided by the principles of the National Charter can be initiated in the socialist society, ‘Awaḍ agrees with his analysis of Egyptian culture in the first half of the century. It has indeed represented the coalition between colonialism and capitalism in Egypt at the time. However, ‘Awaḍ adds, besides the official established culture, whose sole aim was to maintain the old system, there has been an unofficial or popular culture which, although weak at the time, was working towards initiating social, intellectual and materialistic changes that the Revolution itself is now seeking. In other words, there had been two cultures in Egypt during the pre-revolution period: the one which supported the established order and articulated the values and interests of the dominant class, and the other which was fighting against this domination. The first principle of the socialist culture is, therefore, to abolish the class nature of culture and to work towards creating a popular culture in both its content and objectives, and to make this culture available to all classes of society by resorting to all forms of mass media such as the press, radio and television. It is the first step towards achieving the intellectual and cultural unity among all the members of society. According to ‘Awaḍ, the old official culture tried to make the Egyptians doubtful of their abilities and ignorant of their history. The Revolution was the best articulation of the Egyptian character or identity in exercising its belief in its potentials and later in realizing them by purging the country of foreign domination and by initiating an economic and industrial revolution. What remains, however, is to extend the revolution to the sphere of culture and this

<sup>17a</sup> Ibid., 161–162.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 167–75.

is the responsibility and duty of the intellectuals. It is their share of the process of building our socialist revolution. According to ‘Awaḍ, the first step in discharging this responsibility is to reveal our character, which is deeply rooted in our tradition, struggle, suffering and hopes, in such a way as to enable us to understand ourselves and then to realize it without any vanity. What is most remarkable about Ḥātīm’s call in ‘Awaḍ’s view, is not only his call for the intellectuals to uphold their cultural tradition but also his encouragement to them to open all windows onto foreign cultures so that “we can have our own distinct culture, which would articulate our distinct character, and we can at the same time open our minds and hearts to what is good in the cultures of other nations, interacting with it without fear . . . or vanity”. Furthermore, besides taking what is good from foreign cultures, it is our duty, Ḥātīm adds, to export our culture. As for the quality of the new culture, says Ḥātīm, we have to be flexible, and hopeful, at the same time, that our cultural life can gradually recover its balance. ‘Awaḍ, agrees that the core of the question is meeting the challenge of combining quality and quantity, or, in other words, to appeal to the masses without sacrificing the high standards of art and literature.

In January 1961, ‘Awaḍ was appointed for the second time as a literary editor of *al-Jumhūriyya* newspaper. Returning to the issue of socialism and literature, he published a series of seven theoretical articles on the subject, described nearly three decades later by the distinguished Egyptian scholar and critic Shūkri ‘Ayyād as an important contribution to modern Arabic literary thought.<sup>19</sup> These articles, together with several others, were collected and published two years later in Beirut in a book under the title *Socialism and Literature*. In May 1968, al-Hilāl Publishing House reissued the book in its long established series *Kitāb al Hilāl* under the title *Socialism and Literature and Other Essays*.

In these theoretical essays, ‘Awaḍ attempts no less than to develop a distinctly Arab perspective on the question of socialist literature in modern Arabic society—a perspective which would reflect the Arab socialist experience in Egypt, without, naturally, neglecting to take into consideration the experience of other nations. In fact, ‘Awaḍ was in the unique position of being, on the one hand, deeply involved

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<sup>19</sup> Shukrī Muḥammad ‘Ayyād, “Luwīs ‘Awaḍ, wa l-Adab al-Ishtirākī,” *ibid.*, 39.

in the cultural life of Egypt and the Arab world, and, on the other, of being highly steeped in the cultural traditions of the other, particularly the West. To use Shukrī ‘Ayyād’s words, ‘Awaḍ has distanced himself from the intellectual conflict which was taking place at the time between, on the one hand, Marxism or what is called scientific socialism and, on the other, a trend which saw the adoption of Leninist Marxism as a form of dependency and called, therefore, for what was sometimes called Arab socialism, which is neither Eastern nor Western. Dealing directly with the original examples of these theories in the West, ‘Awaḍ tried to draw from them “the most suitable elements for building a social and literary thought that truthfully expresses out nature and the style of our life”. Drawing on his diverse, complex and rich experience of cultural encounter with the other tradition, he objectively and clearly presented the conflicting world theories of literature and literary criticism and later proceeded “to criticize them from a view point which is less an expression of his personal temperament than an anticipation of the distinctive character of our culture”.<sup>20</sup>

Introducing his discussion of socialism and literature, ‘Awaḍ points out that although we have traveled since 1954 along the road of socialism without hesitation we still question the status of literature, its function, aim and relation to life within socialist society. We still ask what its constituents, principles and elements are and how we can protect it from both its enemies and its ignorant friends. Hence the need for a reconsideration of the two main doctrines on art, literature, science and thought: the first which stresses their priority over everything else and the second which subordinates them to life.<sup>21</sup>

Because Egypt’s experience of socialism was rather brief, ‘Awaḍ quite wisely suggests that the issue should be studied in the light of the experience of other nations.<sup>22</sup>

Since life is more general and comprehensive than society; since life embraces the individual and society, the spiritual and the material and the human and the national, it is quite natural for ‘Awaḍ to associate literature with it rather than with society. Thus, the call for “Literature for Life’s Sake”, he adds, is both a nationalist and a humanistic call because it makes literature serve both the national

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>21</sup> Luwīs ‘Awaḍ, *Socialism and Literature*, 7–8.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 8.

and human life; it is both a materialistic and spiritual call because it makes literature serve both the materialistic and spiritual life; and it is a social and an individualistic call because it makes literature serve both society and individual.<sup>23</sup> 'Awaḍ's emphasis on the humanistic, spiritual and individualistic aspects of this call seems to stem from the humanistic character of his concept of socialism. For "this is the essence of our socialism which accommodates and must accommodate all these meanings and aspects". It is not only nationalist but also humanistic; it is not only materialistic but also spiritual; it is not only social but is also individualistic. In short "socialism, as we understand it, is a humanistic doctrine and socialist literature, as we understand it, is a humanistic literature".<sup>24</sup>

This socialist literature, however is endangered by either worshipping the individual or worshipping society. In the cultural sphere, the first danger is embodied in the schools which advocate the notion that literature, art, science and religion are sought for their own sake, while the second is embodied in the schools which put literature, art and science at the service of either the material life only or the spiritual life alone. The two dangers, in 'Awaḍ's view, are the outcome of oversimplifying life and splitting the original unity of spirit and substance, of ideal and existence, of form and content and finally of shape and subject.

Classifying these schools according to their relationship with the ideal and reality, 'Awaḍ proceeds to present each school, outlining its basic assumptions, quoting its major representatives, showing how it conceives of the function and boundaries of literature, and finally how it poses a threat to the socialist and humanistic literature needed for the socialist society which was in the making at the time in Egypt.

Starting with what he terms as the idealistic school (*al-Madāris al-Mithāliyya*) he discusses the following:

- A. The school of art for art's sake (*Madrasat al-Fann li l-Fann*) represented by Oscar Wilde<sup>25</sup> and Walter Pater;<sup>26</sup>
- B. The impressionistic school (*al-Madrasa al-Ta'athuriyya*), represented by J.E. Springarn;<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>25</sup> 'Awaḍ, refers to, and quotes from, Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1891) which he translated into Arabic and published in Cairo in 1946.

<sup>26</sup> 'Awaḍ cites here Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873).

<sup>27</sup> 'Awaḍ cites here Springarn's *The Creative Criticism and Other Essays*.

- C. The neo-humanistic school (*Madrasat al-Insāniyya al-Adabiyya; al-Hiyūmāniyya*), represented by Irving Babbitt,<sup>28</sup> Paul Elmer More, N. Foerster and others;
- D. The school of new rationalism (*al-Madrasa al-‘Aqlāniyya al-Jadīda*) or what is known as Neo-Catholicism or Neo-Classicism, represented by T.S. Eliot;<sup>29</sup>
- E. The school of instinct (*Madrasat al-Fiṭra*), represented by D.H. Lawrence;
- F. The school of the collective unconsciousness (*Madrasat La-Wa‘y al-Majmū‘*), represented by C.G. Jung;<sup>30</sup>
- G. The school of surrealism (*al-Madrasa al-Siryāliyya*), represented by André Breton;<sup>31</sup>
- H. The school of the stream of consciousness represented by James Joyce and Marcel Proust.

‘Awaḍ then turns to the materialistic school (*al-Madāris al-Māddiyya*), considering the following:

- A. The school of revolutionary socialism (*al-Ishṭirākīyya al-Thawriyya*), represented by Michael Gold,<sup>32</sup> Ralph Fox and Christopher Caudwell;
- B. The school of purposive literature (*al-Adab al-Hādīf*) represented by Granville Hicks,<sup>33</sup> Joseph Freeman<sup>34</sup> and others;
- C. The school of economic determinism (*al-Ḥatmiyya al-Iqtisādīyya*) or historical determinism (*al-Ḥabr al-Tārīkhī*), represented by Karl Marx,<sup>35</sup> Phillip Rahv,<sup>36</sup> V.F. Calverton,<sup>37</sup> John Strachy,<sup>38</sup> Granville Hicks and others;

<sup>28</sup> ‘Awaḍ refers to Babbitt’s *Rousseau and Romanticism* and discusses it at some length. See *Socialism and Literature*, 162–3.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Awaḍ cites here Eliot’s “Religion and Literature” and *For Lancelot Andrews*. See *Socialism and Literature*, 24–32.

<sup>30</sup> See C.G. Jung’s *Four Archetypes*.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Awaḍ cites here Breton’s first and second manifestoes. See *Socialism and Literature*, 35–9.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Awaḍ cites here Gold’s speech at the American Writers Congress held in 1930. See *Socialism and Literature*, 41–2.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Awaḍ refers here to Hicks’ *The Great Tradition*, see *Socialism and Literature*, 50.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Awaḍ cites here Freeman’s “Introduction” to *Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology*, edited by Granville Hicks and Joseph Freeman (New York, 1936). See *Socialism and Literature*, 53.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Awaḍ cites here Marx’s *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. See *Socialism and Literature*, 51–2.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Awaḍ refers here to one of Rahv’s articles in the *Partisan Review*, see *Socialism and Literature*, 44.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Awaḍ quotes Calverton’s *The Liberation of American Literature*, see *Socialism and Literature*, 45.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Awaḍ refers to Strachy’s paper “Literature and Dialectical Materialism,” see *Socialism and Literature*, 45.

- D. The school of socialist realism (*al-Wāqī'iyya al-Ishtirākiyya*) which is mentioned only once in passing and without any reference to its basic assumptions or major representatives.

Having presented, critiqued and shown how both the idealistic and materialistic schools are against socialist literature in particular and socialism in general, 'Awaḍ concludes his discussion of the question of socialism and literature by outlining his notion of sound socialism (*al-Ishtirākiyya al-Salīma*) which he wants literature to serve. According to him, sound socialism is distinguished by the following:

1. Socialism is first and foremost a humanistic idea. Hence, its most important characteristics are its broad and comprehensive outlook which recognizes no boundaries, its tolerance, magnanimity and vastness. It knows no fanaticism or narrow dogmatism, acknowledging everything that enhances the humanity of man, but never claiming that it is the last word in the dictionary of human thought and organization. For it sees itself simply as a step forward on the road of humanity towards realizing its great destiny.<sup>39</sup>

2. Sound socialism recognizes the tradition of the past, present and future and everything which stimulates the human desire for the truth, goodness and beauty, confirming man's right to realizing them in his life on the largest possible scale. It acknowledges every serious doctrine in thought, art and literature and accepts all philosophies both idealistic or materialistic, individualistic or societal, as well as all literary schools whether they are those of reason, emotion or imagination. Recognizing the great humanistic tradition with all its contradictions, it sees that the growth of life cannot be accomplished except by the resolution and then the dissolution of these contradictions into a harmonious unity that is higher than its constituents. Because denying these contradictions can only lead to an insoluble crisis which could be suicidal for humanity and this is utterly unacceptable to sound socialism which stands on the side of life, the life of not only one generation, class or civilization but the life of man whenever and wherever he is.<sup>40</sup>

3. Sound socialism is based on the greatest recognition (*al-Itirāf*)

<sup>39</sup> Luwīs 'Awaḍ, *Socialism and Literature*, 56.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-7.

*al-A'zam*) denouncing the greatest rejection (*al-Inkār al-A'zam*), and seeing in every school of thought, art and literature a creative and positive aspect which contributes to the great tradition. This aspect is the criticism of life which is the first prelude towards its growth and improvement.<sup>41</sup>

4. Sound socialism recognizes all schools as a criticism of life but never as an approach to life. It rejects every doctrine that sees itself as the sole remedy for the suffering of humanity, because it believes that this is, in fact, the source of that suffering.<sup>42</sup>

5. Sound socialism considers that the biggest mistake in the doctrines of thought, art and literature lies in the split they all exhibit, between subject and object, shape and substance, form and content, thought and mind, principles and behavior, function and organ, and means and aims. In fact, in 'Awaḍ's view, "evil" and "defection" are mere words invented by man to describe this split and "death" is nothing except this complete and mutual division between the soul and substance. Thus the only way to achieve the intellectual, artistic, or literary perfection is the complete unity between these binary oppositions or their oneness.<sup>43</sup>

6. Since socialism is a social doctrine, clearly defined and born within a certain frame of time and space, it might adopt certain intellectual, artistic or literary trends which serve its immediate circumstances and aims. Thus a socialist thought, art and literature would come into existence. Being a humanistic idea, socialism recognizes the great danger hidden in this narrow doctrinaire position or what 'Awaḍ had previously called "the greatest rejection." Realizing that its thought, art and literature are all partial and derived from the contradictions of life, socialism knows all too well that, with its victory, humanity will approach its unity and harmony and there will not then be any art or literature which is aristocratic, bourgeois or proletarian. Only one thing will remain, which is what is humanistic.<sup>44</sup>

7. "Art, literature, science, truth, goodness for their own sake are merely myths invented by the idealist in order to protect himself from the aggression of the materialist. Likewise art for the sake of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 57-8.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 58-9.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 59.

society, the purposive art or the art with a message etc. are also myths invented by the materialist to protect himself from the aggression of the idealist. The two myths stem from the deep awareness of this split between idea and substance, subject and object, partial and total and temporary and permanent, or from forgetting the unity of existence."<sup>45</sup> There is no art, literature, or thought which exists only for its own sake or for the sake of certain aims or ends. Everything has to be for the sake of man, for the sake of all humanity.

True socialism, socialism in its deep and broad sense recognizes that every thought, art and literature which does not spring from man and pour into him, is futile. It also recognizes that the true man from whom it springs and the perfect man to whom it aspires is he who embodies the unity of existence.<sup>46</sup>

Having presented extremely briefly 'Awaḍ's review of the literary schools that are against sound socialism, which he wants literature to serve, one can examine in some detail (a) 'Awaḍ's basic assumptions and his approach to the question; (b) his consideration of the literary schools; and (c) his notion of sound socialism.

#### ASSUMPTIONS AND APPROACH

As we have seen, 'Awaḍ first presents the idealistic and materialistic schools and then proceeds to offer a synthesis of the two types. Categorizing literary schools according to their relationship with ideal and reality, he talks about idealistic and materialistic schools, reducing the latter to Marxism while failing to refer to the origins of the former. He does not for instance make any reference to Baumgarten or Kant when he reviews the school of art for art's sake. 'Awaḍ refutes the idealistic schools and rejects them on grounds inspired by a Marxist standpoint, as Ghālī Shukrī says,<sup>47</sup> while, at the same time, he has certain reservations about the same grounds which he has already accepted and used in refuting the idealistic schools (his attitude towards the past). Notwithstanding his eclectic approach (to be considered at length later), one should point out that this is only

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 59–60.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>47</sup> Ghālī Shukrī, *Mādhā Aḍāfū ilā Damīr al-ʿAṣr*, 168.

one strategy among several which he employs in his discussions. Also worth noting here is the fact that his differentiation between society and life is not convincing, and consequently one can hardly be expected to accept all those attributes which 'Awaḍ freely attaches to the concept of society in order to justify his preference for the use of "Literature for Life's Sake". These differences between life and society are, as Ḥusayn Muruwah rightly remarks, unfounded and one cannot, therefore, accept all 'Awaḍ's subsequent conclusions.<sup>48</sup> Insisting that we study this issue in the light of the great human experience, 'Awaḍ proceeds to review all these schools while unfortunately neglecting what, in this context, is perhaps most relevant, namely the views of other Arab critics<sup>49</sup> on this issue. This, in fact, runs quite contrary to his notion of "the greatest recognition" as well as to his claim that sound socialism is against the greatest rejection or denial. Furthermore, he fails to relate the question of socialism and literature to Arab life and society, which such a literature is supposed to serve. 'Awaḍ of course, cannot be denied the right to recommend what he thinks is best suited to one's society. However, he might also be expected to take account of both the Arab critics' discussion of the issue and the Arab reality itself. In the event, 'Awaḍ studies only the great Western humanistic experience and not the Arab experience in the light of the former, as he promised in the first chapter of his book. This might be attributed to his belief in his pioneering role in calling for a close relationship between literature and society and his assumption that only his contribution is relevant to the discussion of the issue. Whatever the reasons behind his neglect of the Arab critics' contribution, one could not deny that such an omission is still unjustifiable and questionable at the same time. 'Awaḍ fiercely attacks the separation of subject from object, shape from substance, form from content or, indeed, any split caused by bigoted opinion or narrow outlook. Yet his main argument is built on such a split between substance and idea and based on categorizing schools into idealistic and materialistic. Furthermore, the originality of his version of sound socialism is more apparent than real for it is, in a way, a mere mixture of what he considers to be the positive aspects of all the schools he attacks and

<sup>48</sup> Ḥusayn Muruwah, *Dirāsāt Naqdiyya*, 64–5.

<sup>49</sup> Such as Muḥammad Mandūr, Muḥammad Mufid al-Shūbāshī, 'Abd al-'Azīm Anīs, Maḥmūd Amīn al-'Ālim, Ḥusayn Muruwah and others.

later rejects for being antisocialist. In essence, sound socialism, as it will be argued later, is nothing except socialist realism which 'Awad chose to ignore.

#### LITERARY SCHOOLS

Turning to 'Awad's survey of the various literary schools which he considers to be against socialism, one cannot help noticing his failure to document his review of them, making it extremely difficult to trace his sources, particularly when he frequently quotes from conferences and proceedings. Although honest and accurate, he is nonetheless eclectic in his quotations which, notwithstanding their original contexts, are cited in order simply to prove his points and support his arguments. Furthermore, 'Awad does not use his citations in their proper context and this naturally undermines the value of his account of these schools and consequently weakens his case against them, because he bases his argument on an obvious misreading of the sources involved. To give only one example, one can refer to 'Awad's misreading of texts when he discusses the objectivity of artistic and human values. Quoting Marx's appraisal of Greek art, 'Awad points out that Marx's interpretation of its enduring aesthetic pleasure is somewhat naive. It stems from Marx's refusal to acknowledge that there are in the form and content of art essential and objective values which transcend ages, civilizations and classes. This appraisal of Marx is frequently quoted and widely discussed. Nonetheless, none of Marx's students fails to recognize his acknowledgment of these essential human values. On the contrary, all of them assert the objectivity of artistic and aesthetic values and relate them to human values as a whole. Here, for example, is Lukacs' comment on Marx's appraisal:

Marx approaches the question which he poses himself from both contextual and historical points of view, noting the relevance of the Greek world, the normal childhood of humanity, to spiritual life of later generations. The investigation thus does not return to the problem of the social origin but advances to the formulation of basic principles of aesthetics, again not from a formalistic point of view but within a comprehensive dialectical context.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Georg Lukacs, *Writer and Critic*, edited and translated by Arthur Kahn (Merlin Press, London, 1970), 73.

Answering the question: "How do we read Marx's praise for the enduring glory of Greek art?" Stefan Morawoski in his "Introduction" to *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* writes:

I believe it may be interpreted much in the way Marx Raphael has suggested, as (a) recognition for the formal harmonious attributes achieved by ancient art. Yet there seem to be two further criteria in the passage which Marx thought important to enduring character of art. (b) By its own specific means art can express the whole significance of the society (Greek art was sustained by a system of living myth based in the specific mode and level of economic activity). (c) This art expressed the highest human values, and thereby offered a tremendous affirmation of humanity. It seems that Marx believed both the latter attributes were particularly suited to the art of a young or native civilization. It would be accurate to relate attribute (b) to artistic cognitive value, and attribute (c) to fundamental human value. The cognitive and the fundamental human values might mingle and are both dependent on attribute (a) which denotes the adequacy of form to the embodied values.<sup>51</sup>

Considering these two interpretations of Marx's appraisal of Greek art, the conclusion appears to be that it does imply the existence of certain permanent aesthetic values and standards and whatever one's interpretation of these values, it is obvious that Marx not only acknowledges their existence but also relates them to form and content. It is also difficult to agree with 'Awaḍ's interpretation of Marx's reservation about the correlation between literary and social economic developments. In fact this reservation suggests that there is no such mechanism as that to which 'Awaḍ objects and that only vulgar Marxists have misused this association and transformed it into mechanical determinism.

What puzzles the reader most is the fact that 'Awaḍ himself states, only one page earlier, that Marx explicitly acknowledges the existence of objective artistic and literary values.<sup>52</sup> Yet he continues to describe Marx's interpretation as rather naive and rejects it for no reason except his own failure to grasp Marx's words as such or is simply projecting his own reading into them.

'Awaḍ's use of citations out of their context can be illustrated by his reference to Freeman's view of experience. At the end of his

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<sup>51</sup> Stefan Morawoski, "Introduction" in Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawoski, *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* (International General, New York, 1974), 46-7.

<sup>52</sup> *Socialism and Literature*, 51.

chapter on the school of purposive literature, 'Awaḍ discusses the Marxist emphasis on the artist being on the side of life, and comments that by this they mean that the writer should be on the side of the proletariat only. This is naturally rejected by him on the grounds that literature should not be confined to one class. Then 'Awaḍ quotes Joseph Freeman's view on the concept of experience. Although 'Awaḍ does not alter Freeman's words, he uses them out of context. For Freeman, in fact, was complaining about the limitations of experience imposed by bourgeois critics, who claim that only the bourgeois values and experiences are the values and experiences of humanity. His main aim, in his introduction to the *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, is to show that the writer is "not a creature in a vacuum",<sup>53</sup> but he "deals with experience rather than theory or action", and the social class to which he is attached conditions the nature and flavour of this experience. Thus he writes:

A Chinese poet of the proletariat, of necessity, conveys to us experiences different from those of a poet attached to Chiang Kai Shek or bourgeois poet who thinks he is above the battle. Moreover, in an era of bitter class war such as ours, party programmes, collective actions, class purposes, when they are enacted in life, themselves become experiences, experiences so great, so far-reaching, so all-inclusive that, as experiences, they transcend flirtation and autumn winds, and nightingales and getting drunk in Paris cafés. It is a petty mind indeed which cannot conceive how men in the Soviet Union, even poets, may be moved by the vast transformation of an entire people [from one stage of development to another].<sup>54</sup>

Then he adds:

The creative writer's motives, however human they may be, however analogous to the motives of the savage, are modified by his social status, his class, or the class to which he is emotionally and intellectually attached, from whose viewpoint he sees the world around him.<sup>55</sup>

It might also be relevant here to recall 'Awaḍ's charge that Marxists are against abstract thought in the works of petit-bourgeois writers,<sup>56</sup> a stand which he utterly rejects. J. Freeman touches upon this very point in his introduction to *Proletarian Literature in the United States*

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<sup>53</sup> Granville Hicks and Joseph Freeman (eds.), *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> *Socialism and Literature*, 41–2.

(which includes some of Michael Gold's critical and poetic works) when he states very clearly that:

Art at its best does not deal with abstract anger. When it does it becomes abstract and didactic. The best art deals with specific experience which arouses specific emotion in specific people at a specific moment in a specific locality, in such a way that other people who have had similar experiences in other places and times recognise it as their own.<sup>57</sup>

This view on the specific nature of art is more likely to be interpreted as a rejection of abstract thought in art rather than a rejection of abstract thought as a whole, as 'Awaḍ claims. Therefore 'Awaḍ's objection to Gold's view is unjustifiable, because his interpretation of such a view obviously is not sound. For unless abstract thought is transformed into art, it can never be considered art at all.

'Awaḍ also confuses the reader when he does not distinguish between a literary school that has ideological or philosophical foundations and a literary technique which can be used by different schools irrespective of their different ideological bases. Here one could refer to the school of the stream of consciousness, as 'Awaḍ calls it.<sup>58</sup> This narrative technique, which developed towards the end of the nineteenth century and was employed to evoke the psychic life of a character and record the random and apparently illogical flow of impressions passing through the mind, turns out to be an idealistic school in 'Awaḍ's classification. There is no doubt that 'Awaḍ is fully aware of such a distinction between these two concepts in Western literature. Hence, one is inclined to think that he might have used them deliberately in this confusing manner in order to serve his blanket condemnations of almost all idealistic schools.

'Awaḍ discusses serious and non-serious schools without giving his reader any clue as to the criteria of his rather peculiar classification.

At the beginning of his discussion of the materialistic schools, 'Awaḍ claims that they are all mechanical and deterministic, depriving man of any free will or subjectivity. Obviously, this is an oversimplification of the issue on 'Awaḍ's part. Distinguishing between the two types of determinism; the abstract one, and the historical one, which involves some kind of human action, it is important to

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<sup>57</sup> Granville Hicks and Joseph Freeman (eds.) *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>58</sup> *Socialism and Literature*, 35.

recall that Engels, defending the latter types, wrote in his letter to Block: “we make our history ourselves,”<sup>59</sup> and even within Marxism the objective conditions, which determine the stage of development, are and can only be the result of human actions in the material world. However, as Raymond Williams says:

There have been many qualifications of the idea of determination, of the kind noted in Engels’ letter to Block, or of an apparently more radical kind, such as the contemporary idea of over-determination (determination by multiple factors). Some of these revisions have in effect dropped the original Marxist emphasis, in attempted syntheses with other orders of determination in psychology (a revised Freudianism) or in mental or formal structures (formalism, structuralism).

Despite his reservations about these qualifications or revisions, Williams acknowledges that:

In its most positive forms—that is, in its recognition of multiple forces, rather than the isolated forces of modes or techniques of production, and its further recognition of these forces as structured, in particular historical situations, rather than elements of an ideal totality, or worse, merely adjacent . . . the concept of over-determination is more useful as a way of understanding historically linked situations and the authentic complexities of practice. It is especially useful as a way of understanding (contradictions) and the ordinary version of the dialectic, which can so easily be abstracted as features of a theoretically isolated (determining) situation or movement, which is then expected to develop according to certain (determinist) laws.<sup>60</sup>

Describing the process of transformation in the epoch of social revolution, Marx draws a line between the material transformation and the ideological one, that is, the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic, in which “man becomes conscious of this conflict [between the material production of society and the property relation within which its members have been at work hitherto] and fights it out”.<sup>61</sup> This distinction that Marx draws is very important in considering the concept of determinism. Also, the role of man—on which Marx insists—must be taken into consideration in any serious discussion of the process of social change and the role of literature in such a process.

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<sup>59</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 85.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>61</sup> Baxandall and Morawoski, *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, 85.

In fact, the issue of mechanism has come under fierce attack from many Marxists such as William Phillips, Philip Rahv,<sup>62</sup> Lukacs and others and it has been associated both with vulgar Marxism and the extreme left.

Compared to this complex concept of historical determination or that of over-determination, and bearing in mind Marx's distinction referred to earlier, 'Awaḍ's concept seems to be outdated. Lagging behind these developments, which have taken place prior to the publication of his book, it is narrowly defined and naively presented, lending support to the charge which Muruwah levels against him when he accuses him of misinterpreting the writings of others and attributing to them certain characteristics as a result of viewing them from a particular ideological standpoint.<sup>63</sup>

In discussing the materialistic schools, 'Awaḍ seems to have been thinking of the radical literary movement in England and America during the second quarter of the twentieth century, when "authors moved politically to the left".<sup>64</sup> Witnessing the poetry of Auden, C. Day-Lewis, Stephen Spender and Archibald Macleish, "Journals were formed . . .<sup>65</sup> which served as organs for Marxist criticism, symposia were edited . . .<sup>66</sup> and books by single authors argued the cause."<sup>67</sup> The immediate result was an extraordinarily vigorous critical approach. The touchstones seemed clearly defined: dialectic materialism; the method of application seemed sure: how does the work contribute to the cause of this social truth? Consequently, as Wilber Scott says:

. . . the judgment could be made with an old Testament force of conviction. So literature and its creators were sorted as being with or against the Truth, the single-minded critic, frequently unfazed by the complexities of art's relation to society, and strengthened by the mood of faith and the sense of revelation, demanded that writers share his creed, and that literature show its validity.

<sup>62</sup> Hicks and Freeman (eds.) *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, 369–70.

<sup>63</sup> Husayn Muruwah, *Dirāsāt Naqdiyya*, 62.

<sup>64</sup> Wilber Scott, *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism* (New York: Collier Books, 1974), 124.

<sup>65</sup> Such as the *New Masses* under Michael Gold's editorship and the *Left Review* under Edgell Rickword's.

<sup>66</sup> Such as Granville Hicks and Joseph Freeman, eds., *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, and C. Day-Lewis, *The Mind in the Chains*, and Bernard Smith, *Forces in American Criticism*.

<sup>67</sup> Such as V.F. Calverton, *The Liberation of American Literature* (1931) and John Strachy, *The Coming Struggle of Power* (1933).

However, there were exceptions such as Christopher Caudwell and others:

But there was madness in the method. As the yardstick became shorter and the applications more naive, it became achieved at the price of its breadth. Finally, with the Russo-German pact and the outbreak of World War II in 1939, and the consequent confusion and defection of many votaries, the movement lost its central strength and ceased to be a major force in literary criticism.<sup>68</sup>

Taking into consideration this brief account of the American and English radical movement, the student of 'Awaḍ's survey of what he calls the materialistic schools, is inclined to think that 'Awaḍ is too selective and far from being objective when he presents the materialistic schools exclusively through this movement. As we have already seen, 'Awaḍ criticizes Babbitt for not taking the historical context into consideration in his evaluation of art or thought, individual or society.<sup>69</sup> Yet in his discussion of this movement he himself ignores this historical context altogether.

The Achilles' heel of 'Awaḍ's critical survey of the materialistic schools lies in his eclectic approach. Firstly, it is difficult to accept those labels which 'Awaḍ has coined, especially when he himself has mixed two of them, namely the school of economic determinism or historical determinism and that of purposive literature. Secondly, 'Awaḍ refers only once to the school of socialist realism without discussing it at all. Thirdly, 'Awaḍ's selection of representatives is confined mostly to Americans while Marxism originated in Europe. Furthermore, even when he refers to British representatives, he fails to present their ideas or quote from their relevant writings. One wonders how a treatment or a discussion of the materialistic schools in literature can be undertaken without considering the continental representatives and how such a study can be comprehensive when it neglects figures such as Georg Lukacs, Alick West, the Frankfurt school, the Soviet Union's representatives and others. The paradox here is that 'Awaḍ considers that these schools express only one type of socialism which is the Marxist one, embodied in the Communist regime, while forgetting to study these schools in Communist countries. Fourthly, 'Awaḍ only uses Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in presenting his views on literature and art. Yet there are

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<sup>68</sup> Wilber Scott, *Five Approaches*, 125.

<sup>69</sup> *Socialism and Literature*, 18.

several collections of Marx and Engels' views on literature and art, and had he been objective and fair-minded, 'Awaḍ would have presented these views through the relevant texts. Also the student of his call can find no justification for neglecting the Sartrean concept of commitment in this context, especially when this concept had exerted a very important influence on modern Arabic literature during the 1950s.<sup>70</sup> Finally, an anthology of *The Proletarian Literature in the United States*, edited by Granville Hicks (school of historical determinism) and Joseph Freeman (school of purposive literature) and including works of Michael Gold (school of revolutionary socialism) and others, was published in 1935. To include works by all of them in one anthology implies that the editors agreed on certain common views (on literature and society and their interrelation) which would justify bringing them together in one volume. This might encourage the student of 'Awaḍ's classification to question its foundations and to conclude that this classification is 'Awaḍ's alone. Yet 'Awaḍ does not even acknowledge that he classifies them, let alone justify what he does.

#### SOUND SOCIALISM

'Awaḍ's concept of sound socialism is basically, as Muruwah rightly remarks, nothing but socialist realism, which 'Awaḍ considers to be against sound socialism in its truly humanistic sense and which he also never discusses. It might, therefore, be useful at this point to compare the elements of sound socialism with their origins in socialist realism, in order to illustrate 'Awaḍ's debt or assumed originality and consequently reach a better understanding of his call for Literature for Life's Sake.

'Awaḍ's emphasis on the humanistic characteristic of sound socialism is, in fact, a notable feature of Marxist thought in general and socialist realism in particular. Thus the most distinguished Marxist aesthetician and critic, Georg Lukacs, writes:

Now humanism, that is, the passionate study of man's nature, is essential to all literature and art; and good art and good literature are

<sup>70</sup> Husām al-Khaṭīb, *Malāmiḥ fī al-Thaqāfa wa l-Adab wa l-Luḡa* (Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, Damascus, 1977), 44, and M.M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature and the West* (Ithaca Press, London, 1985), 12-16.

humanistic to the extent that they not only investigate man and the real essence of his nature with passion but also and simultaneously defend human integrity passionately against all attacks, degradation and distortion. Since such tendencies . . . attain such a level of inhumanity in no other society as under capitalism just because of the objective reification we have mentioned, every true artist, every true writer as a creative individual, is instinctively an enemy of this distortion of the principle of humanism, whether consciously or not.<sup>71</sup>

For, artistic creation and aesthetic gratification presuppose—in Marx’s eyes—the specifically human appropriation of things and of the human nature that is to prevail in a Communist society.<sup>72</sup> Comprehensiveness is also very important in socialist realism. For “a socialist perspective, correctly understood and applied, should enable the writer to depict life more comprehensively than any preceding perspective, not excluding that of critical realism.”<sup>73</sup>

The heritage of the past is crucial for socialist realism and the assimilation of this heritage determines the extent of the originality of a literary work. “The stronger a writer’s ties with the cultural heritage of his nation, the more original his work”<sup>74</sup> writes Lukacs.

In the field of aesthetics, literature theory and literary history,

Marxism raises to conceptual clarity those fundamental principles of creative activity which have been presented in the philosophic outlook of the best thinkers and the works of the outstanding writers and artists over the centuries.<sup>75</sup>

So, only those who do not have any real knowledge of Marxism believe that the cultural liberation of the proletariat means the complete abandonment of the past.

The classics and the founders of Marxism never maintained such a view. In their judgment the liberation struggle of the working class, the working class ideology and culture to be created, are the heir to all mankind has produced of value over the millennia.<sup>76</sup> Lenin once

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<sup>71</sup> Georg Lukacs, “Marx and Engels on Aesthetics” in his *Writer and Critic*, 69 and 61–88.

<sup>72</sup> Adolfo Sanchez Vazques, *Art and Society*, translated by Moro Riogracos (London: Merlin Press, 1973), 10.

<sup>73</sup> Georg Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, translated by John and Necke Mander (Merlin Press, London, 1972), 98.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>75</sup> Georg Lukacs, *Writer and Critic*, 75.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

declared that one of the superiorities of Marxism to bourgeois ideologies lay precisely in its capacity critically to accept the progressive cultural heritage and to absorb whatever was great in the past.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, since socialist realism is based on class structure, which is a dynamic formation, it contains within itself the past, present and future of the society in question. Hence in literature a critical understanding of the present is the key to the understanding of the past, and since the ideological basis of socialist realism is based on the understanding of the future, individuals working for that future will necessarily be portrayed from the inside.<sup>78</sup>

Turning to the concept of totality which covers the following three aspects: (a) the totality of man; (b) the relationship between reality and appearance; and (c) the dialectical relationship between the parts and the whole, one can easily notice that Marxism, to begin with, emphasizes the totality of man. Engels, for instance, points out (in his criticism of Lassalle's drama) that "only with representations of the multifaceted life of the people could he provide genuine and vivid characters for his drama".<sup>79</sup> Engels and Marx, therefore, urged the writers of their time

... to take an effective stand through their characters against the destructiveness and degradation of the capitalist division of labour and to grasp man in his essence and totality. And because they missed in most of their contemporaries this attempt at viewing mankind individually as a whole, they considered these writers insignificant epigones.<sup>80</sup>

For the struggle of the proletariat is for a free development of a many-sided integrated man.<sup>81</sup>

As for the relationship between reality and appearance, it is not that of absolute opposition, as 'Awad tries to suggest, and there is no such separation between the two in Marxist aesthetics or in socialist realism. Marxism "does not admit an exclusive opposition between appearance and reality", Lukacs says, but "seeks the reality in appearance and the appearance in its organic relation to the reality".<sup>82</sup> The aesthetic capturing of the reality and of the idea is not a simple,

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 74-5.

<sup>78</sup> Georg Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, 95.

<sup>79</sup> Georg Lukacs, *Writer and Critic*, 72.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 80.

definitive act, but a process, an active, step-by-step approximation of essential reality, a recognition of the fact that the most profound essence of reality is never more than a part of the total reality to which the surface phenomena also belong.<sup>83</sup>

Finally, Marxism in general, and socialist realism in particular, emphasize the concept of the dialectical relationship between the parts and the whole. Lukacs, as Alan Swingewood writes, stresses that:

... the elements of totality are not defined as uniform and identical, as was the case with vulgar Marxism; but form a dialectical and contradictory relation with one another, as a unity of oppositions; there is no mutual influence or reciprocal interaction of otherwise unchangeable objects and the complex unity of any totality (whether economic, political, cultural etc.) is not dependent on one single contradiction.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, this unity is comprehensive enough to combine the universal, particular and individual into a dynamic unity. This particular dialectic must be manifested in specific art form. For, in contrast to science which dissolves this activity into its abstract elements and seeks to conceptualize the interaction of these elements, art renders this activity perceptually meaningful as movement in a dynamic unity.<sup>85</sup>

‘Awad’s insistence that literature, art and thought should exist only for the sake of man, is, in fact, the starting point of Marxism, and Marx directly and indirectly touches on fundamental human equivalents throughout his aesthetic thought. This, as Stefan Morawoski rightly suggests, is the necessary background to his all-out search for the means of social disalienation which assumes a fundamental human potential.<sup>86</sup>

‘Awad’s rejection of proletarian literature, thought and art, seems to be derived from Trotsky, who asserts in his *Literature and Revolution* that such terms as proletarian literature and proletarian culture (‘Awad substitutes socialist for proletarian) are dangerous, because they erroneously compress the culture of the future into the narrow limits of the present day. For Trotsky, as Edmund Wilson says:

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 80 and after.

<sup>84</sup> Alan Swingewood, “Marxist Approaches to the Study of Literature”, in Jane Routh and Janet Wolff (eds.) *The Sociology of Literature: Theoretical Approaches* (University of Keele, Keele, 1978), 135.

<sup>85</sup> Georg Lukacs, *Writer and Critic*, 77.

<sup>86</sup> Stefan Morawoski, *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, 36.

... did not believe in a proletarian culture which could displace the bourgeois one. The bourgeois literature of the French Revolution had ripened under the old regime; but the illiterate proletariat and peasantry of Russia had had no chance to produce a culture, nor would there be time for them to do so in the future, because the proletarian dictatorship was not to last: it was to be only a transition phase and to lead the way to "a culture which is above classes and which will be the first truly human culture".<sup>87</sup>

ʿAwaḍ's exclusive emphasis on the American representatives in particular and Western ones in general in his discussion of the main literary schools, especially the materialistic ones, can be explained by his cultural formation which is, almost exclusively, Western and American. He has no direct contact with East European sources. Sympathetic readers of his criticism might refer to his discussion of al-Shūbāshī's concept of realism, considered earlier in this study, in which he quotes Belinsky or to his studies of Mayakovsky<sup>88</sup> and Pasternak<sup>89</sup> in his book *Socialism and Literature*, as well as to his attack on Khrushchev's hostile attitude towards modern art.<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, one must not, however, exaggerate the importance of such references, in view of the following: (a) ʿAwaḍ knows no Russian and therefore relies for his knowledge of Russian literature on English or French sources; (b) ʿAwaḍ's studies on Eastern literature, compared with those on Western literature are very limited indeed; (c) ʿAwaḍ's views on Pasternak or Mayakovsky reflect in part a Western standpoint, both of them having acquired quite a distinguished status in the West, an achievement which might indicate that ʿAwaḍ's interest in them is merely an extension of his interest in Western literature as a whole.

ʿAwaḍ's emphasis on the importance of the past can be attributed to his profound interest in classical studies, whether Ancient Egyptian, Greek, Latin or Arabic, and is evident in his translations of Greek and Latin critical texts<sup>91</sup> and dramas,<sup>92</sup> as well as his comparative study<sup>93</sup> of *The Epistle of Forgiveness* by al-Maʿarrī.

<sup>87</sup> Edmund Wilson, "Marxism and Literature", in *20th Century Literary Criticism*, edited by David Lodge (Longman, London, 1972), 244.

<sup>88</sup> *Socialism and Literature*, 77–92.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 93–108.

<sup>90</sup> Luwīs ʿAwaḍ, "al-Mutaradidūn," in his *Dirāsāt ʿArabiyya wa Gharbiyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1965), 9–13.

<sup>91</sup> Luwīs ʿAwaḍ, *Nuṣūṣ al-Naqd al-Adabī ʿind al-Yūnān* (Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1965).

<sup>92</sup> Luwīs ʿAwaḍ, *Thulāthiyāt Ūrist li Askhūlūs* (Cairo: al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li l-Kitāb, 1987).

<sup>93</sup> Luwīs ʿAwaḍ, *Alā Hāmish Al-Ghufrān* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1966) and Maḥmūd

'Awaḍ's attempt to reconcile the idealism of al-'Aqqād, the rationalism of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and the materialism of Salāma Mūsā seems to be behind his assembly of all these ambivalent ideas in his concept of sound socialism and his proposed synthesis. Also, his insistence on the free will of man and on taking individuality into consideration throughout his discussion can be related to the influence of al-'Aqqād whose interest in individualism and freedom had left a strong impact on his writing in all fields.<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, the social aspect of 'Awaḍ's ideas seems to be connected with the influence on him of Mūsā and Marxism while his attempt at a reconciliation of these ideas stems from Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's rationalism. Nothing would better sum up his position than M.M. Badawī's observation when he perceptively notes that, in view of the confusion and ambivalence of his position, in his attempt to reconcile the freedom of the writer with his social and political responsibility, 'Awaḍ wants, as it were, to eat his cake and have it too.<sup>95</sup>

The fact of the matter is that 'Awaḍ tries to go beyond socialist realism because he sees it merely as the literary and artistic articulation of the Leninist Marxism which happens to be opposed by the Egyptian regime at the time on the grounds that it is a form of dependency, an infringement of the independent stand in which the regime has prided itself. However, in his elaboration of his notion of sound socialism which he wants literature, art and thought to serve, 'Awaḍ gets nowhere. For he presented only what he decided to ignore or rather to silence, the socialist realism in its very self.

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Muḥammad Shākir, *Abāṭil wa Asmār*, parts 1 and 2, 2nd Edition (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Madani, 1972).

<sup>94</sup> Muḥammad Mandūr, *al-Naqd wa l-Nuqqād al-Mu'āṣirūn*, 89–92.

<sup>95</sup> M.M. Badawī, *Modern Arabic Literature and the West*, 16.

“ONLY WOMEN AND WRITING CAN SAVE US  
FROM DEATH”: EROTIC EMPOWERING IN  
THE POETRY OF NIZĀR QABBĀNĪ (D. 1998)

AMILA BUTUROVIC

A critical link between Nizār Qabbānī’s poetry and the concerns of Syrian society was made after the launching of his very first collection of poems, *The Brunnette Told Me* (*Qālat lī al-Samrā*), in 1944. At both thematic and formal levels this collection of twenty-eight short pieces challenged a number of conventional poetic models and cultural norms, generating a heated debate at several levels.

Love was its main focus. Though the theme of love has received a frequent and varied treatment in Arab poetic tradition, Qabbānī’s articulation of very personal sentiments and highly erotic longings in a style that simplified the classical patterns infused love with an ingenious poetic meaning. His pointed criticism of the social milieu was directed at the relationship between the sexes in particular. His annoyance with the hypocrisy that governed sexual norms, and his rejection of the blunt misogynist attitudes which left the Arab woman under the constant scrutiny of patriarchal canons, became the target of Qabbānī’s amatory verse. His mission, as he put it, was to liberate the body from sexual repression and more specifically, to allow the Arab woman to cherish her erotic ecstasy openly and freely.<sup>1</sup>

Controversy erupted instantly: Sheikh al-Ṭanṭāwī characterized the poems as “blasphemous and stupid,” while young Syrian readers treated the collection as a kind of manifesto of their culturally suppressed sexuality.<sup>2</sup> The generational cleavage deepened, as older people found Qabbānī’s style and themes quite unsavory and inappropriate, while the young wholeheartedly embraced it. At a socio-aesthetic level, Qabbānī’s adoption of certain Western literary and cultural ideals that echoed throughout the collection provoked anger among advocates of traditional values, and enthusiasm among those

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<sup>1</sup> S.K. Jayussi, *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 37.

<sup>2</sup> M. Ṣubḥī, *Nizār Qabbānī Shā’iran wa Insānan* (Beirut: Dār al-Adāb, 1958), 16.

who viewed them as a belated deliverance from regressive tradition. Thus, Syrian society became bitterly divided on the issue. Where they stood unified, however, was a realization that the poetic presence of Nizār Qabbānī could never be ignored after such a controversial entry into the public arena.

Today, scholarly studies on Qabbānī's poetry strongly affirm his social engagement: in 1957 Salma K. Jayyusi called his poems "an important social document"<sup>3</sup> She reasserted this view more recently in the Introduction of an English collection of Qabbānī's poetry.<sup>4</sup> In 1974, Arieh Loya developed an essay around Jayyusi's thesis, stating that "apart from the artistic value of his poetry, Qabbānī's poems remain social documents reflecting the social problems of Arab youth and their inter-sex relationships in the Arab society of the last three decades."<sup>5</sup> This opinion is strongly shared by Muḥyī al-Dīn Ṣubḥī in his *Nizār Qabbānī, Shā'iran wa Insānan*, and many other critics as well. Indeed, while much of the postmodern world speaks of the "death of the author," we are reminded, quite lucidly, of Qabbānī's engaged presence every time we revisit his poetic corpus.

#### THE MAKING OF A POETIC SELF

Yet in spite of a stormy initial encounter with the reading public and the fact that his subsequent poetic career would rarely be free from controversy, Nizār Qabbānī cannot be labeled as a "revolutionary" poet per se. At the outset, his dialogue with the dominant ideologies is carried out at different planes across time and space, and he bravely challenges several of them: poetic conventions, gender relations, religious discourse, linguistic elitism, etc. Yet, though he advocates change, Qabbānī's position is continuously moderated by the same voices of authority that he addresses in the first place. He readily opens the door to change, but he never fully crosses its threshold. As a result, Qabbānī seems to float in a kind of discursive liminality which prevents him not only from breaking away from the norms that he has set out to challenge, but also from embrac-

<sup>3</sup> S.K. Jayyūsī, "Wathīqa Ijtimā'iyya Hāmma," *al-Ādāb* 5 (November, 1957): 1.

<sup>4</sup> L. Jayyusi and S. Elmusa (tr.), *On Entering the Sea: The Erotic and Other Poetry of Nizār Qabbānī* (New York: Interlink Books, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> A. Loya, "Poetry as a Social Document: The Social Position of the Arab Woman as reflected in the Poetry of Nizār Qabbānī," *Muslim World* 63 (1973): 52.

ing the new ideals which he is known to foster. Critical studies on al-Qabbānī remark on this to varying degrees: for example, John Asfour, in his analysis of the evolution of poetic conventions in modern Arabic poetry, characterizes Qabbānī as a “partial convert” to new forms.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Z. Gabay and Arieah Loya in their respective discussions on Qabbānī’s love verse note that, though Qabbānī explicitly sides with the Arab woman’s attempt to personalize erotic experiences, he nevertheless uses very impersonal modes in addressing his fictive beloved, emulating thus a common practice in classical Arabic poetry to protect the poet’s beloved from public exposure.<sup>7</sup>

One can go further in looking for Qabbānī’s synthesis of different modes and styles. For example, his language is frequently construed as a mix of classical and spoken Arabic. Most of his love themes are simultaneously sacred and profane, drawing on the poetic symbolism of both Sufi writings and classical Arabic and Persian poetry. At times, his poetic self is conflated with his real self. At other times, in giving the Arab woman a social voice, he crosses the sexual border between men and women, adopting a poetic female “I”.<sup>8</sup>

A few words about this poetic transvestitism are due here because they shed a bit more light on the eclectic poetic personality of Nizār Qabbānī. Adopting a female “I” is a very uncertain kind of empathic intent, which allows Qabbānī to question the exclusiveness of an erotic experience without putting at risk his sexual ego. In other words, Qabbānī creates a hypothetical space in which he can maintain his real male self—albeit backgrounded by the adopted female identity—and successfully blur, though not erase, the line that divides the two social spaces. In that sense, his practice differs greatly from the female impersonators in many traditional theatres (e.g., English, Chinese, Japanese, and even Arab, in which Qabbānī’s own grandfather had been engaged)<sup>9</sup> where women are generally denied access

<sup>6</sup> J. Asfour, *When the Words Burn: An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry* (Dunvegan, On.: Cormorant Books, 1988), 27.

<sup>7</sup> A. Loyah, “Poetry as a Social Document,” 50; Z. Gabay, “Nizār Qabbānī, the Poet and his Poetry,” *Middle Eastern Studies* (1974), 218.

<sup>8</sup> In the collection of poems entitled *Qaṣā'id* (1956), three quite popular poems of that kind are contained: “Pregnant,” “Letter from a Spiteful Woman,” and “The Vessels of Pus.”

<sup>9</sup> Abū Khalīl, Qabbānī’s grandfather, was forced into exile because of the impersonation of female characters done by young men in his theatre. The theatre itself was closed down as a result of the controversy created by the practice (see B. Frangieh and C. & R. Brown, *Arabian Love Poems*, xv).

to the theatrical stage on account of immorality and public exposure. In Qabbānī's case, his exercise is supposed to be corrective and his occasional self-feminization a way to break away from that tradition. As he explains in his own words: "The East needs a man like me to put on the clothes of a woman and to borrow her bracelets and eyelashes in order to write about her. Is it not an irony that I cry out with a woman's voice while women cannot speak up on their own?"<sup>10</sup>

But in identifying bracelets and long (artificial?) lashes as female symbols, Qabbānī implicitly constructs the type of woman he chooses to speak for. His attempts to represent "the Woman's" feelings are bound to be determined by what he, "the Man," would want her to feel: if she is the archetypal woman, then he is likely to be the archetypal man. In the poem called "Little Things," she is gentle and romantic. Her feelings are pure and vulnerable. Her vision of her beloved is sweetly idealistic. (S)he says:

Little things  
Which mean the world to me  
pass by you  
without making an impression.  
From these things  
I build palaces  
Live on them for months  
And spin many tales from them,  
One thousand skies,  
And one thousand islands  
But these little things  
Mean nothing to you. . . .<sup>11</sup>

In another poem, "A Voice from the Harem," the female character expresses rage over the propensity of her lover to perceive only her surface beauty rather than her inner self:

. . . I am seeking—O you exploiter!—  
A man that would love me  
For you do not know how to love.  
You are a collector of objects.

<sup>10</sup> From the introduction to his *Yawmiyyāt Imra'a lā Mubāliya*, as cited by B. Frangieh and C. & R. Brown, *Arabian Love Poems*, xx. This is not untypical of Qabbānī's patriarchal male contemporaries across cultures who, when promoting a higher position for women, contended that they should speak on their behalf.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv.

Your field is the eyes [of women]  
 Not what is behind those eyes.  
 You are a child playing  
 With colored beads. . . .<sup>12</sup>

Although the gentleness of the woman in the former poem is elipsed by the rage of the latter, vulnerability and passion, two tropes typically associated (by men) with the female psyche, are very much present.

So although he is driven by a noble cause, Qabbānī does not seem to be at his best with his cross-dressing. Ironically, what seems more fascinating than the poetry related in the woman’s voice is Qabbānī’s voyeuristic intrusion in to her world. It give us a sense of larger issues that Qabbānī affronts but also internalizes. Here we can recall Marjorie Garber’s examination of cross-dressing in the Chinese and Japanese stage traditions. She makes a general argument that “the presence of the transvestite, in a text, in a culture, signals a category crisis elsewhere [that is, a failure of definitional distinction] . . . The transvestite is a sign of overdetermination—mechanism of displacement. There can be no culture without the transvestite, because the transvestite marks the existence of the Symbolic.”<sup>13</sup> In Qabbānī’s case, the creation of a fictive female figure may very well signal his (and his reader’s) deeply ingrained discontentment with the impermeability of the traditional categories of “gender.” So more than speaking “for the woman” he speaks “of the woman” from an experimental perspective in which mutability rather than permanence informs the socio-aesthetic norms.

#### PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Qabbānī’s dilemma of espousing two or more poetic identities can perhaps be placed in the context of his personal background. Though born into a conservative Damascene family in 1923 (he died in 1998), the high social status enjoyed by the Qabbānīs allowed young Nizār to be brought up in progressively cosmopolitan ways. The schools

<sup>12</sup> A. Loya, “Poetry as Social Document,” 49.

<sup>13</sup> M. Garber, “The Occidental Tourist: M. Butterfly and the Scandal of Transvestitism,” in A. Parker, M. Russo, D. Sommer & P. Yaeger (eds.) *Nationalism and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 125.

he attended offered education in both French and Arabic exposing him—particularly at the National College of Science—to a cross-cultural experience that sharpened his critical eye vis-à-vis both milieus. As his mental horizons expanded, a tension between the “progressive” and the “conservative,” dichotomized somewhat uncritically as the opposition between Western and Muslim Arab cultures, began to shape his vision of life and fuel his creative imagination.

The maturing of Qabbānī’s self-consciousness has frequently manifested itself as an interplay between seemingly contrasting positions. For example, Qabbānī nurtures a free poetic spirit, of which he says the following in the introduction to his second collection of poems, *Tufūlat Nahd*:

I wish art could become the property of all people, just like the air, the water, a bird’s song. I dream that there be a poetic city . . . Only when my readers sense that I have become their mouth and voice shall I reach the goal of making poetry exist in every household, along with bread and water.<sup>14</sup>

Paradoxically, however, Qabbānī also decides to structure his life by studying Law—of all things—at Damascus University. A determination to both set free and incarcerate his consciousness at once is quite striking. So is the attempt to reconcile a poetic quest to liberate woman from social oppression, with a diplomatic career that had led him to represent that same society in an ambassadorial role in capitals like Cairo, Ankara, London, Madrid, Beijing, and Beirut between 1945 and 1966. Though his diplomatic status was put to the test at several occasions,<sup>15</sup> Qabbānī has remained quite comfortable with moving through different circles within the Arab society at large.

As mentioned earlier, this transition from one identity to another is reflected in Qabbānī’s work at different levels. His poetic forms are a synthesis of the traditional and the new. His language is an

<sup>14</sup> N. Qabbānī, *Tufūlat Nahd*.

<sup>15</sup> Two such events instantly come to mind: in 1954, after the publication of the highly controversial but widely recited poem “Bread, Hashish, and a Moon” (“*Khubz, Hashish wa Qamar*”) in 1954 (which has now acquired a private niche in the cyberspace as well), Qabbānī created a crisis in the Syrian parliament, which demanded that his diplomatic service be terminated. Similarly, after the 1967 Arab defeat Qabbānī’s poem “Marginal Notes on the Book of Defeat” (*Hawāmish ‘alā Daftar al-Naksa*) Egypt proclaimed him a persona non grata and banned all his works, including the music inspired by it. It was only after a personal appeal to President Nasser that he was pardoned (which seems to confirm the above discussion on Qabbānī’s tendency to reconcile the conflicting aspects of his life).

amalgam of standard and spoken Arabic. His erotic themes are imbued with the sacred and the profane tropes, borrowing from both Islamic and Christian spiritual traditions. His demands on the woman are both carnal and Platonic. His women are both virtuous and lewd. Though one can argue that the variations in style can be explained by Qabbānī’s maturing as a poet and a social being, I believe that it is more fruitful to look at the moving landscape of his poetry phenomenologically—at least to some extent,—because this can allow us to concretize Qabbānī’s poetic self in the totality of his literary creation.

I say to some extent because Qabbānī’s works cannot—and should not—be dehistoricized. We must remind ourselves that the beginnings of Qabbānī’s poetic career coincide with the issues of political and social self-determination in Syria. In 1943, a year before the publication of Qabbānī’s first anthology, nationalists had come to power at the first free elections, ousting the French from the political domination in Syria. Three years later, in 1946, the French mandate in Syria came to an end completely. The subsequent decades brought a continuous tension between the secular government and the religious institutions, creating a dialectic that engaged<sup>16</sup> many activists and public figures of Syria at the time.

As the new era unfolded, the progressive youth demanded new commitments and searched for an adequate collective response that would propel Syria into a new future rather than lock it in its past. Their request to re-negotiate many traditional values was bitterly complicated by the recent French presence, dividing Syrian society into those who advocated “Westernization” as the only reasonable response to modernity, and those who viewed Westernization as a denial of the Arab-Muslim cultural legacy. In other words, as a self-denial.

Regardless of the fact that Syrian youth seemed not to have problematized the idea of “Westernization,” it is important to acknowledge that this search for new selfhood carried profound consequences for both collective and individual consciousness. While the collective rhetorical platform focused on a very transformative content addressed to society at large, individually, Syrian men and women conceived

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<sup>16</sup> For a useful analysis see A. Hiunebusch, “Islamic Revivalism in the Arab East: Syria,” in S.T. Hunter (ed.) *The Politics of Islamic Revivalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 39–57.

of the idea of change in very personal terms. Qabbānī's poetry, driven largely by the same ideological forces, imbued the lives of young women and men with a synaesthetic sensation of that change. Their engaged minds responded to the sensuousness of Qabbānī's eroticism. The free sexual "self" as conceived in his emancipatory verse became correlative to the social and political freedom. Therefore, the empathic response of young Syrians—especially students<sup>17</sup>—to Qabbānī's writings had to do with a much larger phenomenon than its conspicuous erotic content. The issues of sexuality and gender relations was deeply intertwined with the process of national self-determination.

In his persuasive study *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe*, George Mosse argues that nation and sexuality are intertwined constructs.<sup>18</sup> Though focusing on the European experience only, Mosse's study is one of the first scholarly analyses to alert us to the fact that both sexual and national identities are at once private and public, and, as such, that they are historically interrelated. Consequently, national agendas greatly affect the shaping of moral codes. Since the publication of this work and a number of (in)direct responses to it, we have learned that in many decolonized countries the issue of identity is often intimately linked with the issue of sexual norms.<sup>19</sup> Further, a national imagining of "womanhood" and "female sexuality" is negotiated at different levels of nationalist (and counter-nationalist) discourses, transferring this seemingly private issue into the discursive public realm.<sup>20</sup>

The degree to which the issue of sexuality has been central and compelling in twentieth-century Syria is quite apparent in our examination of Qabbānī's socio-poetic voice. Though explicitly foregrounding it in his poetry, Qabbānī cannot be credited with introducing the

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<sup>17</sup> In his work *Qisṣatī ma'a al-Shi'r* (Beirut: Manshūrāt Nizār Qabbānī, 1973), Qabbānī affirms his bond with the students whom he describes as his "troops" and "voice."

<sup>18</sup> G.L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Actually, even before Mosse, F. Fanon has linked sexuality and postcolonialism, but he used the "progressive" categories of sex and gender in relatively regressive ways. See his "Algeria Unveiled," in *Studies in Dying Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, R. Cobham, "Misgendering the Nation: African Nationalist Fiction and Nuruddin Farah's *Maps*," in A. Parker, M. Russo, D. Sommer & P. Yaeger (eds.) *Nationalism and Sexualities*, 42–59.

issue of sexual norms in the public dialogue of the mid-century Syrian society. The aforementioned Sheikh al-Ṭanṭāwī’s response to the publication of *Qālat lī al-Samrā’* indicates the already existing centrality of sexual behaviour and female body as tropes of public discourse. Here is how Ṭanṭāwī phrased his response to the anthology:

A year ago in Damascus a little book was published with a glossy, smooth cover like the fancy paper which is used to wrap chocolate at weddings. The book is tied with a red ribbon like the one the French used at the beginning of their occupation of Damascus to girdle the hips of some women. The collection contains a description of a shameless whore and every festering and sinful thing. It is a realistic description but without imagination because the author is not an imaginative man. Rather he is a spoiled school boy, rich and dear to his parents . . .<sup>21</sup>

It is striking how profoundly Ṭanṭāwī’s simile reflects the prevailing tension between the forces of tradition and those of “Westernization.” On the one hand, he concretizes the image of occupied Syria as a female body, but not a veiled, or “chaste” body that concurs with the *‘ulamās* understanding of the Qur’anic teaching. Rather, it is the belly-dancers, female singers and prostitutes who embody an already corrupted Syria. On the other hand, by constructing the French occupying imagination along the lines of these “immoral” belly dancers who cooperate with the foreigners in their own invasion, Ṭanṭāwī eroticizes the historical context at large. His critique is thus pointed to both the internal and external players in the social and political arena. It assigns a portion of blame to Syria itself for being violated, because “she may have asked for it.” For Ṭanṭāwī, women who behave as commodities have turned their country into commodity as well. Or, to put it differently, women who do not side with tradition—which he, as an *‘ālim*, is supposed to safeguard—and who discard motherhood, chastity, and domesticity in favour of Western and secular values that supposedly denude and exteriorize their bodies, facilitate the disintegration of social mores at large. Indeed, they become the very site of that disintegration. Qabbānī’s association with that erotic world is therefore an alarming moment that requires a rejection of not only his poetry but of him as a credible and honorable Arab “man.” Consequently, he

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<sup>21</sup> Cited in B. Frangich and C. & R. Brown, *Arabian Love Poems* (Colorado Springs: Three Continents Press, 1993), xviii–xix (emphasis mine).

becomes feminized—“unimaginative, spoiled, dear to parents”—and thus not taken seriously.

Inadvertently, Ṭaṭṭāwī offers us a glimpse into the religious establishment’s discourse on sexuality. On the other hand, Qabbānī, who has set himself the aim of challenging it, allow us to understand the centrality of that discourse in his and his readers’ social awakening. The problematique surrounding the woman’s space in Syrian society in transition is addressed by Qabbānī’s poetry at several levels: her self-conceptualization, her relationship to men and other women, her unproductive and reproductive sexuality, her place in the national struggle, her ability to mobilize creative imagination, her erotic transcendence and immanence, etc. The representations are quite eclectic, reflecting the complexity of the prevailing discourse(s) on sexuality, and Qabbānī’s own dilemma vis-à-vis the issue.

Having in mind these disparate issues, I now want to focus on a link between “writing” and “loving,” two recurrent tropes in Qabbānī’s verse. I want to explore the affinity between love as an epistemic experience and writing as a route to self-affirmation, and the way they enable the poet to make sense of the different discursive voices that inform his creative imagination. In a way, this erotic empowering of the human mind as expressed by Qabbānī is akin to the great love poetry in the Sufi, and indeed, Christian mystical tradition. To that end, Sufi influences have already been noted by Qabbānī’s critics,<sup>22</sup> and Qabbānī himself has addressed them, both explicitly and implicitly. One poem, entitled “Sufi revelations” partially reads as follows:

When green mingles with black, with blue  
with olive, with rose in your eyes, my lady  
a rare condition takes hold of me  
halfway between waking and absence, rapture and journey  
between revelation and suggestion, death and birth  
between the paper longing for love . . . and the words.  
Orchards beyond orchards beckon to me  
garden beyond gardens  
lanterns beyond lanterns  
and beyond them corners, cushions, disciples,  
and children singing . . . candles . . . birthday of saints.  
I see myself in a Damascus garden  
surrounded by golden birds

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., A. Loyah, “Poetry as a Social Document,” 43.

and a golden sky  
and fountains murmuring with voices of gold  
and I see, as a man asleep sees, two open windows  
behind which thousands of miracles takes place . . .<sup>23</sup>

In the above verses, as in the rest of this powerful poem, Qabbānī condenses the experiential and social dimensions of the Sufi tradition. The Sufi journey to a higher consciousness is likened to the journey towards the erotic *fanā*, in which writing, miracles, and saint worship (the epistemological, the numinous, and the social) come together. The intensity of an erotic experience cannot be less than any other transcendental journey, Qabbānī seems to imply, because its ambiguity and fluidity propel the imagination to write and therefore to create.

In addition to its experiential vigor, the Sufi tradition can serve as an inspiration thanks to its attempt—among many other things—to erase the gap between religious elitism and populism, and to bring together spiritual objectivity and subjectivity. In that light but without characterizing him as a Sufi poet, we can consider Qabbānī’s verse as an endeavor to diminish the tension between literary elitism and populism, and draw closer the poetic male subject to its female object. Therefore, the different voices that enter Qabbānī’s verse are a necessary affirmation of not one but several realities that exist in his social and literary context. Or to put it in Bakhtin’s terminology, Qabbānī’s writing is heteroglossic (though, significantly, Bakhtin would not associate heteroglossia with poetry), in the sense that it foregrounds the conflict of several authoritative positions, each of which allows the poet to understand his discontent with the social conditions and articulate his appeal to change. Let us, then, explore the ways in which Qabbānī articulates the affinity between writing and loving.

#### WHEN LOVING IS CREATING, WHEN CREATING IS WRITING

A large number of Qabbānī’s erotic poems embody the Biblical message that the act of creation is contained in the Word (logos). In one of these poems, he rephrases the Genesis narrative so as to essentialize eroticism and writing in all of the creation:

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<sup>23</sup> Cited by L. Jayyusi and S. Elmusa (tr.), *On Entering the Sea*, 85.

In the beginning there were poems. And I suppose  
 that the exception then was flat bold prose  
 First of all there was the deep wide sea  
 dry land exception then appeared to be  
 First the breast's abundant curve and all  
 the plainer contours were exceptional  
 And first of all was you and only you  
 then afterwards were other women too.<sup>24</sup>

Many other poems reflect the mystical teachings that love is the driving principle of the cosmic creation. As in the above poem, these two messages are personalized and broadened to the plane of human relationships, specifically between men and women. The vertical cosmogonical trajectory is extended horizontally to include any creative experience that a human being can possess when relating to other human beings. In one such example, Qabbānī writes:

Why, why? Since you became my beloved,  
 My lamp has given more light and my notebooks have turned more  
 prolific.  
 All things have changed since you began loving me.  
 I became like a child, playing with the sun,  
 and though I am not a messenger  
 I turn into a prophet  
 whenever I write about you.<sup>25</sup>

Qabbānī establishes an immediate causal link between loving and writing. Notably, the causality is associated with both passive and active roles, since both “loving” and “being loved” produce the same epistemological effect. The light motif, common in the mystical tradition, is constructed along the logos motif, which enables the reader to bridge the cleavage between the exoteric and the esoteric dimensions of both erotic and epistemological experiences. Furthermore, the lover, by virtue of setting the beloved's pen in motion, becomes exteriorized in the notebooks, and is offered to the reader in the final stage of the creative cycle. Thus, all three players—the poet, the reader, and the fictive lover—are drawn closer together. Intimacy is thus achieved through the prophetic role of the poet, not in the manner of an ordained missionary—*lastu nabīyyan mursalan*—but inspirationally.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>25</sup> B. Frangieh and C. & R. Brown, *Arabian Love Poems*, 20–21.

Qabbānī’s employment of religious tropes is extremely effective, because it opens a dialogue with the rich tradition in both Christian and Islamic pietism in which a playful interaction of profane and sacred tropes erases the doctrinal distinctions between the two, approximating the poet’s inner passion to the reader, i.e., the outsider. The eroticization of the mystical quest has been a relatively common practice. Whether we are reading Rumi, Rābī‘a, Marguerite Porete, or St. John of the Cross, we are struck by a constant oscillation between sensual and transcendent experiences, which allows us to cherish the tensions produced by the poetic tropes. Yet while mystical poets foreground the divine, Qabbānī uses similar techniques to grant the primacy of human beings as the objects or subjects of erotic experiences. This is quite obvious in the following poem:

Your love . . . oh You with fathomless eyes,  
 Is extreme,  
 Mystic,  
 Holy.  
 Your love, like birth and death,  
 Is impossible to repeat.<sup>26</sup>

The tension between the transcendent and the sensual is maintained by portraying the beloved in an iconic way, typical of Byzantine sacred paintings in which the holy figures are depicted as having profoundly spiritual countenance. Mystic and saintly, in other words. Love, likened here to two central rites of passages, birth and death, contains the elements of both realms of existence, and it emanates from a woman who occupies a central creative role. Furthermore, Qabbānī asserts the uniqueness of every love experience, which implicitly challenges the social expectations on Muslim Arab men and particularly women, to publicly acknowledge one such experience only. In other words, non-productive sexuality, associated most often with illicit sexual intercourse by the legal code and therefore severely punished, presents for al-Qabbānī an equally necessary experience as the religiously endorsed procreative sexuality. As he expresses it elsewhere, “The freedom which I ask for woman is the freedom to love, the freedom to say to a man who appeals to her: ‘I love you’, . . . without her head being thrown in the trash can.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 18–19.

<sup>27</sup> Qabbānī, *Yawmiyyāt Imra’a lā Mubāliya*, 9–28, as cited by Gabay, “Nizār Qabbānī, the Poet and His Poetry,” 218.

Therefore, attributing creative powers and transcendental qualities to love has grave social implications, insofar as Qabbānī uses his metaphors to draw attention to the sensitive issue of erotic intimacy. As far as Qabbānī is concerned, love, like knowledge, is both cumulative and unique, and whosoever possesses them will be bonded with humanity as a whole:

I want you to teach me the first knowledge  
 Of reading and writing on your body  
 Whoever does not read  
 The notebooks of your body  
 Will remain illiterate  
 All his life.<sup>28</sup>

But even more than associating knowing and loving at an empirical level, Qabbānī advocates a kind of “Cartesian eroticism” to explain an existential link between the two:

I love you,  
 therefore I am in the present  
 I write, beloved,  
 and retrieve the past.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to rephrasing a philosophical message in sensual terms, Qabbānī alludes to another important issue: love is a relation, not a thing in itself. To speak of love makes sense as long as there are two parties involved. The subject and the object interlink again. Therefore, no matter how abstract or impersonal the object of love may appear on a mute page, by virtue of declaring one’s emotions towards her/him, the object is removed from its positional neutrality. The emotions become a public matter, a desired (or undesired) freeway of social communication. The lover and the beloved are thus identified through an erotic bond which in itself constitutes a social phenomenon. Just as present day critical theory warns us not to perceive of identity as a self-contained abstract experience but a formation that delimits the “self” from the “other” in a dynamic historical context, Qabbānī attaches to love a similar social force, enticing his reader to treat every love poem as a “real” experience. The boundary between the general and the particular collapses: every woman becomes all women, and every knowledge all knowledge. In

<sup>28</sup> B. Frangieh and C. & R. Brown, *Arabian Love Poems*, 212–213.

<sup>29</sup> L. Jayyusi and S. Elmusa (tr.), *On Entering the Sea*, 23.

the writings of many Sufis we find allusions to the necessary interconnectedness between the subject and the object, this time between creator and creation. As Dārā Shikōh put it, paraphrasing the *basmalla*: “In the name of Him Who has no name, but who appears by whatever name you will call Him.”<sup>30</sup>

The Sufi symbol of the “lifting of the veil” as the first step of the divine union and a gnostic moment of reaching the ultimate truth—*al-haqq*—is operative in Qabbānī’s poetry as well. Here, it is reframed as a literal removal of the veil worn by Muslim women as per some interpretations of the Qur’anic message, as well as figuratively, in the sense of the didactic intent of art to enlighten the reader about conditions in the world in which they live, no matter how tragic they may be.<sup>31</sup> Thus the iconography of the veil, so commonly but diversely associated with the Islamic ethos, gains a new kind of efficacy in Qabbānī’s writing.

It is no wonder then that Qabbānī’s verse had such a powerful impact on the Arab youth from the start of his career. As Şubhī observes, young men and women had long sought a catalyst for expressing their frustrations and discontentment with sexual norms. Yet these sexual norms were just a sign of many other latent and explicit issues that the early readers of Qabbānī had to confront. Foucault maintains that sexuality is a socially and culturally determined form of discourse produced by an institutional apparatus which is neither centralized nor simply designed to repress sex. Rather, just as the link between power and knowledge, there is a discursive relationship between sexuality and power regulated at both private and public levels by a whole network of social practices.<sup>32</sup> As has been discussed earlier in the essay, in the case of Syrian youth of the mid-20th century, the anger towards the sexual politics reflected its general frustration with the political uncertainty of the time. In order to offer encouragement by not associating erotic empowering with transcendence only (e.g., “When I love I become time out of time,” or “our love walks on water”), Qabbānī injects eroticism with a more palpable sense of power:

<sup>30</sup> A.M. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of Carolina Press, 1975), 284.

<sup>31</sup> Z. Gabay “Nizār Qabbānī, the Poet and his Poetry,” 209.

<sup>32</sup> See M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, I: An Introduction*, tr. R. Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978); also, P. Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Random House, 1984).

When I am in love  
 I make the Shahs of Persia  
 One of my followers  
 I make China obey my every command  
 I move the seas from their customary places  
 And if I wanted  
 I could control the hands of time.<sup>33</sup>

Here Qabbānī draws links between authority and creativity in a very persuasive way that cuts through different dimensions of “power.” Its political, physical, and metaphysical dimensions merge as a common consequence of an erotic experience. There is something in it for everyone, particularly for the young who continuously face the challenge of self-empowering and self-definition.

Yet along with a recognition of Qabbānī’s ability to mobilize the readers’ consciousness in the name of sexual emancipation, a critical response to his tendency to homogenize the sexual identity needs to be raised. Though he advocates viewing love as a dynamic, relational experience, his position on sexuality is not always equally consistent. In other words, he fails to acknowledge that not all Arab women or men, across generations, social positions and personal experiences view sexual liberation in the same way. By creating an archetypal woman who embodies all aspects of womanhood, Qabbānī robs the actual Arab woman of a personal choice. Indeed, that runs against the social reality across the Arab world—and the Muslim world at large—in which the symbols of veil, domesticity, and chastity elicit ambivalent interpretations. Qabbānī seems to dissociate these symbols from the complex social narrative through which they evolve, imbuing them instead with a transcendental, and therefore transhistorical meaning. In a manner of speaking, he gets enveloped in his own veil metaphor.

In spite of this problematic homogenization of the Arab woman’s aspirations, Qabbānī’s poetry remains one of the most powerful outcries against her subordination in the pervasive patriarchy. He feminizes the world so as to empower her, and in turn, to empower himself. In the poem “The History of Women,” he writes:

I love you female because  
 Civilization is female  
 Poems are female

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<sup>33</sup> B. Frangieh and C. & R. Brown, *Arabian Love Poems*, 23.

Stalks of wheat  
vials of fragrance  
Even Paris—is female  
and Beirut—despite her wounds—remains female  
In the name of those who want to write poetry . . . be a woman  
in the name of those who want to make love . . . be a woman  
and in the name of those who want to know God . . . be a woman.<sup>34</sup>

Here, too, Qabbānī draws an epistemological triangle (writing—love—God) which can be operative only when womanhood is accepted in all its manifested complexity. But even more than propelling Arab society towards that acceptance, Qabbānī elevates, in a very passionate and poetic way, the discussion of gender relations at the plane where other acute social and political issues—modernity, secularism, nationalism—are disputed.<sup>35</sup> It is no wonder then that Qabbānī has been called “by far the most popular poet in the Arab world,”<sup>36</sup> and that his poems, though challenging Arabo-Islamic tradition at several levels, have impregnated Arab culture in a very traditional way—by being publicly recited, sung to music, and even “suspended.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> L. Jayyusi and S. Elmusa (tr.), *On Entering the Sea*, 115.

<sup>35</sup> An excellent discussion on the links between sexuality and identity construction is offered by Irvin C. Schick, *The Erotic Margin: Sexuality and Spatiality in Alterist Discourse* (New York & London: Verso, 1999).

<sup>36</sup> S.K. Jayyusi in L. Jayyusi and S. Elmusa (eds.), *On Entering the Sea*, x.

<sup>37</sup> It is reported that Qabbānī himself participates very often in poetry readings, attracting large audiences across the Arab world. It is also said that many of his verses have been embroidered and hung on walls in many Arab homes. See B. Frangieh and C. & R. Brown, *Arabian Love Poems*, xxviii.

CREATIVITY IN THE NOVELS OF EMILE HABIBY,  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *SA'ĪD THE PESSOPTIMIST*

PETER HEATH

Emile Habiby (Imīl Ḥabībī), who passed away in 1996, is justly regarded as one of the finest novelists of modern Palestinian and Arabic literature. Over the course of a literary career that spanned some thirty-five years (he was born in 1922), he wrote five novels—*Sudāsiyyat al-Ayyām al-Sitta* (*The Sextet of the Six Days [War]*, 1969), *al-Waqā'ī' al-Gharība fī Ikhtifā' Sa'īd Abī 'l-Naḥs al-Mutashā'il* (*The Strange Events surrounding the Disappearance of Sa'īd the Unlucky, the Pessoptimist*, 1974), *Luka' ibn Luka': Thalāth Jalsāt amām Ṣandūq al-'Ajab* (*Luka', Son of Luka': Three Sessions Before the Treasure Chest of Wonders*, 1980), *Ikhtīyya* (*What a Shame!*, 1985), and *Sarāyā bint al-Ghūl* (*Saraya, the Ghul's Daughter*, 1992). In addition, he wrote a number of short stories, several collections of essays, and as one of the founders and, for many years, the editor-in-chief of the Communist Party Arabic newspaper, *al-Ittiḥād* (Haifa), he also authored many newspaper articles and commentaries.<sup>1</sup>

As a writer of fiction, Habiby achieved fame with his second novel, *The Strange Events surrounding the Disappearance of Sa'īd the Unlucky, the Pessoptimist* (hereafter, *Sa'īd the Pessoptimist*). The critical celebration that this novel has enjoyed is, in my opinion, eminently justified; it is a minor masterpiece of absurdist black humor, social critique, and political satire. Yet as is the case with many masterpieces, the novel has overshadowed the other fiction that Habiby has written. The question that this essay poses is why this is the case? In other words, for the purposes of exploring the issue of creativity in modern Arabic literature, what imaginative characteristics or artistic strategies do we discern in *Sa'īd the Pessoptimist* that make it stand out in comparison to Habiby's other work? Or to formulate the question differently, what features do Habiby's other novels and stories lack that make them fall short of what he achieved with *Sa'īd the Pessoptimist*? In ask-

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<sup>1</sup> See the bibliography at the end of this essay.

ing this question, I do not propose to develop a formulistic menu or quantitative index of attributes that fiction should display in order to be declared successful. Nevertheless, the issue of critical evaluation is central to the topic of artistic creativity. Creativity by itself is no criterion for artistic success. Indeed, to the extent that rampant and disorganized creativity leads to chaos and incoherence, it can be a prescription for failure. In addressing the issue of literary creativity, therefore, inquiry into the matter of successful versus unsuccessful (or less successful) creativity is a necessary endeavor. Achieving a full understanding of the sources and causes for artistic creativity and their relation to aesthetic success may be difficult, but we should at least pursue the question.

*Sa'īd the Pessoptimist* is a multi-layered work. To appreciate its complexity and creativity, we must first separate the most prominent of its narrative codes, bearing in mind that their interaction and interplay contribute just as much to the novel's creative achievement as does their existence as independent levels of analysis. The codes on which I focus here are the pseudo-autobiographical, the romantic, symbol and allegory, the fantastic, anecdote, intertextuality, parody and the absurd, and, finally, the creative harmony that exists among them.<sup>2</sup>

#### PSEUDO-AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Habiby's narrative is grounded, in event and in voice, by the character of Sa'īd the Pessoptimist and his own relation of his life, presented in the form of letters written to a learned friend in response to the inquiries from other friends and acquaintances who have wondered about Sa'īd's whereabouts and fate. As with all autobiography, the author chooses the frame and contents of his story. No autobiography can be comprehensive, so an assessment of which events are excluded from the narrative are just as important as a survey of those included. As a pseudo-practitioner of the genre of autobiography, Sa'īd is well-served by his choice of the letter or epistle format, since this framing device allows him to create a narrative that is less linear or temporally-bound than reliance on a strictly chronological structure would entail. The epistle's open-endedness provides

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<sup>2</sup> For one influential version of the concept of narrative codes, see Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974).

ample opportunity for anecdotal asides, cultural and historical interjections, and topical political observations, all of which permeate the work. It also has distinct advantages over another possible format, the diary form. Rather than recording a day-by-day account of his life, Sa'īd, in his "letters," looks back over the full extent of his past life, choosing which aspects of it to relate or to ignore.

Sa'īd's narration of his life story is closely connected with his occupational relationship with the Israeli state. He begins his autobiography by describing how he sneaked back into the newly-formed state and obtained work by seeking out his father's old friend and employer, Adon Safsharscheck. As a result of this contact, Sa'īd becomes a leader of the Union of Palestinian Workers, working under the Sephardic Jacob and the latter's Ashkhenazi boss, the "Big Man of Small Stature," (so-called because he is physically quite short). Sa'īd's ensuing professional life as an Israeli informer and collaborator is not the novel's only narrative line, but it is a dominant one. The nature of his work greatly influences his personal and family life, for example. He loses his first beloved, Yu'ād, when state authorities deport her; he is only allowed to marry his next beloved, Bāqiyya, after his employers determine that his marriage increases his political usefulness, and he loses his final beloved, the second Yu'ād, in a manner similar to that in which he lost the first, through deportation.

Sa'īd's professional status also reflects and provides insights into his personal character. He is in many ways a "wise fool," albeit a particularly hapless and witless one. As a Palestinian informer who collaborates with the Israelis, he has sunk to the lowest level of both Palestinian and Israeli society. Yet this low status allows him to lay claim to another form of professional identity. As Sa'īd himself puts it, he is the "tea-boy," or the "office-boy" (*al-nadl*) whose activities enable the rest of the office to function (59, trans. 3). Indeed, he is intrinsically a member of that nameless yet ever-present group that the newspapers refer to as "the others", or "the rest," those whose presence is mentioned in news reports although they are never individually identified (62, trans. 7).

In contrast to the usual practitioner of autobiography, a famous statesman, intellectual, or artist, for example, who writes autobiography from the lofty position of prominence that success in life has awarded and thus gazes from above at the workings of ordinary society, Sa'īd observes life from below. His insights are no less determined by his status in life, except that in occupying the lowliest place of

society, he gazes upward to describe the events that surround him. As a consequence, Sa'īd is a true anti-hero. Unable to manage either heroism or villainy, his only real achievement is consistent banality. Whether he passively follows the suggestions or orders of others, or whether he acts by default, he remains seemingly oblivious to the idea that he has choices in life. He is both well-suited to his profession and molded by it.

Finally, Sa'īd's story ends not when he dies or has achieved some momentous deed but rather when his official relationship with the state ends. Even this occurs through the actions of others. Plucked from his life by creatures from outer space, he is free to write his letters from nowhere.

#### ROMANCE

Underlying and accompanying Sa'īd's official life is his personal one, which centers on his love life. Each of the novel's three parts culminates and concludes with the loss of a beloved. In Part One, Sa'īd loses his childhood sweetheart, Yu'ād, when soldiers enter his apartment to arrest and deport her. More tragic, perhaps, is the loss of his wife of twenty years, Bāqiyya, at the close of Part Two. After she joins their son, Walā' who is besieged by soldiers seeking to arrest him for becoming a partisan, mother and son both dive into the sea to escape arrest. Sa'īd assumes that they have either drowned or died while hiding in an underwater cave. In the novel's third part, he loses the second Yu'ād, a young woman from an "Arab country" who is trying to visit her Feda'i brother, also named Sa'īd, in Shatta prison. Sa'īd the Pessoptimist, who has previously met this other Sa'īd in prison, assumes at first that she is the same Yu'ād whom he lost twenty years before. She finally explains to him that she is the first Yu'ād's daughter. When she too is arrested in his apartment and deported, he simultaneously loses a potential beloved and a surrogate daughter.

The romantic code of the novel serves the important purpose of alleviating its dark tones of irony and sarcasm by providing Sa'īd with resonant emotional credibility. In this arena at least, Sa'īd's emotions are straightforward and pure. He truly loves his wife and son and the two Yu'āds, and he suffers greatly from their loss. Romance in the story thus allows the reader to identify and empathize

with Sa'īd and his feelings of love and loss. It humanizes him by cutting through the irony and cynicism that dominate the rest of the book.

#### SYMBOL AND ALLEGORY

The novel's romantic code also provides a good example of Habiby's use of symbol and allegory. Yu'ād means "That which will be returned." As such, the two Yu'āds represent two generations of the Palestinian people living in exile. The first Yu'ād is committed to resistance against the Israelis but since she is disorganized and unsophisticated, she is easily arrested and expelled. The characterization of the second Yu'ād reveals the changes that a generation has wrought. She legally crosses the border to visit her brother in prison. When the authorities realize why she has entered Israel, they cancel her travel permit and seek to deport her. In her case, however, removal is marked less by violence than by mutual legalism. The soldiers treat her with respect, examine her papers, and explain why her entry permit has been canceled. She accepts their explanation and is prepared to leave with them. When Sa'īd the Pessoptimist protests that the soldiers will take her to a country not her own, she replies calmly: "But I am going back to a country that isn't my own anyway" (191, trans. 153). Her statement demonstrates that for her generation exile has become normal. When Sa'īd suggests that she try to hide, she asks what good that will do, since she can hardly change political reality while in a state of concealment. The second Yu'ād displays similar sophistication when she and Sa'īd visit a village, where she impresses him by her presence of mind and command of the situation as she deals with the males of the village. This generation, Habiby suggests, may not solve all the problems they face, but they see reality more clearly and are more sophisticated in their attitudes and expectations than the generation of Sa'īd the Pessoptimist.

If the two Yu'āds represent the Palestinian diaspora, Sa'īd, his wife Bāqiyya (literally, "she who remains"), and his son, Walā' symbolize three aspects of the Palestinians who have remained in Israel. Sa'īd, having surrendered his independence, thoughtlessly and uncritically accepts the new state as his master. Bāqiyya's position is more ambiguous. Although she does not actively resist the state, she has not acquiesced to it. She waits, preserving the secret of her family's

treasure, a chest of gold and family jewels that is hidden in an underwater cavern. She continues to seek the location of this treasure, which represents her birthright of political freedom and cultural authenticity, but she does so in secret. Finally, there is Sa'īd's son, Walā'. The couple had planned to name their son Fathī, or Conqueror, but are convinced by Sa'īd's employer, the "Big Man," that Walā' (i.e. loyalty) is a more acceptable name. The name turns out to be two edged, however, since the state cannot determine to whom Walā' should give his loyalty. When he grows up, he becomes a resistance fighter, hence being "loyal" to his heritage rather than to the new state of Israel. At the last moment, Bāqiyya sheds her ambivalence and joins her son in flight from Israeli soldiers. Sa'īd fears that they have perished in the sea, but their true fate remains unclear. It may be that they will eventually reappear as active resistance fighters. Here Habiby suggests that the destiny of the generational mindsets that Bāqiyya and Walā' each represent are still emerging.

This use of family names, of which Sa'īd's own long and elaborate name is another instance, is only one example of the use of symbol that fills the novel.<sup>3</sup> Other symbols, such the ass that represents Sa'īd's stupidity, passivity, and stubborn resistance, are comically obvious. Early in the novel, Sa'īd's life is saved when an ass takes the bullet intended for him. Somewhat later, Sa'īd rides an ass when he crosses into Israel and first meets the military governor, and the topos recurs several times in the novel's first part (93, trans. 44; 98–100, trans. 50–52).

Habiby also uses space for symbolic purposes. When Sa'īd is sent by the army to reason with his besieged son, Walā', who is hiding in a cellar, father and son proceed to discuss the issue of space, i.e. whether it is better to be free in an enclosed cellar or imprisoned in the open air of external society. In fact, Sa'īd lives in captivity. Even his presumed places of freedom, private spaces such as his home or his village, for example, are always liable to external invasion from state security forces. His state of open imprisonment receives explicit symbolic representation in Part Three of the novel. At the start of Part Three, whose events begin just at the end of the 1967 June War, Sa'īd finds himself:

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<sup>3</sup> For discussion of Sa'īd's name, see Allen, *The Arabic Novel*, 209ff.

sitting on a flat surface, cold and round, not more than a yard across. A wind was blowing, strong and bitter cold, and my legs seemed to be dangling over the side of a fathomless pit. I wanted to rest my back but found that there was a pit behind me like the one in front, and that it surrounded me on all sides. If I moved, I would be certain to fall. I realized that I was sitting on the top of a blunt stake (159, trans. 117).

At the end of Part Three, after the deportation of the second Yu'ād, Sa'īd again finds himself sitting on the stake, i.e. immobile and helpless. When Sa'īd finally does move, it is to outer space, through the auspices of the alien beings whom he first meets near the lighthouse of Acre. Clearly, Habiby uses spatial designations for symbolic purposes.

These symbolic representations are part of the novel's larger allegorical structure in which every character and event symbolizes aspects of the relationship among and between Palestinians and Israelis. Sa'īd is the passive survivor, the two Yu'ād's different generations of those driven into exile, Bāqiyya and Walā' two generations of those among Israeli Arabs who decide to resist. Among Israelis, Sa'īd's immediate boss is a Shephardic Jew, while the "Big Man of Small Stature" is Ashkhenazi. On a general level, each character and event participates in the novel's allegory. Early in Part One, for example, Sa'īd and the military governor escort encounter a peasant woman and her son trying to return to their village of Berwah. The military governor tells the two to turn to the east and keep walking. As they do so, Sa'īd notices a strange occurrence:

The further the woman and child went from where we were, the governor and I standing in the jeep, the taller they grew. By the time they had merged with their own shadows in the sinking sun they had become bigger than the plain of Acre itself. The governor still stood awaiting their final disappearance, while I remained huddled in the jeep. Finally, he asked in amazement, "Will they never disappear?" (68, trans. 15-16).

Habiby uses even chance encounters such as this to make points of larger significance in the allegorical structure of the novel.

#### THE FANTASTIC

The fantastic code in the novel is most closely connected with Sa'īd's encounter and eventual joining with the creatures from outer space.

Like all good fantasy, such events are presented as ordinary and everyday.<sup>4</sup> He first meets these spacemen near the lighthouse of Acre and eventually absconds with them. There may be symbolic or allegorical interpretations for these events, but Habiby allows his readers to puzzle them out. For Sa'īd, the fantastic is no less amazing than everyday reality, and hence he accepts each on an equal footing. An example of this is when he tells how at one point he begins to meow like a cat when he speaks, to the extent that even his son throws stones at him when he calls (122, trans. 76–77). Contrast this fantastic statement with Sa'īd's "ordinary" discovery on his way to prison that the rules for life in jail do not differ substantially from those he has been following outside of it (165, trans. 124). At the novel's end, the recipient of Sa'īd's letters tells how he tried to track him down, eventually visiting a mental hospital. His search is unsuccessful, however; Sa'īd's statement that he now lives with visitors from outer space may seem fantastic, but it remains as cogent an explanation of his location as any other.

#### ANECDOTE

Much of Habiby's novel consists of Sa'īd's anecdotal asides. Initially, these consist of incidents of family history that explain how Sa'īd's family became Pessoptimists and what this state entails. Across generations, members of the family have shared certain behaviors: wives always run away from their husbands, family members always look down to the ground in hope of discovering buried treasure, and the Pessoptimists always look on the bright side of events, no matter how terrible they may be. An example of this last trait is given when Sa'īd's mother learns that her first son has suffered a horrible death in a construction accident. Rather than grieving, her reaction is: "It is best that it happened like this and not some other way." (66, trans. 13).

Events in the novel often touch off anecdotal reminiscences connected to Sa'īd's past, how as a schoolboy he met the first Yu'ād (69–71, trans. 17–19), for example, or his encounter with the Lebanese girl

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<sup>4</sup> On the fantastic in literature, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970) and Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

Ghazāla (83–84, trans. 32–34), or the story of the old lady, Thurayā, who lost her treasure when she informed the authorities of its existence (136–38, trans. 93–96). On two occasions, such “anecdotes” consist of direct addresses to the reader: when Sa‘īd notes how objects change in value during war (93–94, trans. 44–45) and in Part Two when he discusses critics’ reactions to the novel’s first part and their comparison of it with Voltaire’s *Candide* (117–21, trans. 72–75).

The use of anecdote imbues the text with an open-endedness and a looseness of plot that facilitate and enhance its symbolic and fantastic codes; they make one feel that any event might occur in the narrative and that any topic might arise. It also reinforces Sa‘īd’s image as simple fool. Although some of the anecdotal references are seemingly odd and even loony, they all contribute to one’s sense of the impossible absurdity of Sa‘īd’s situation in his relations with the Israeli state.

#### INTERTEXT

In an interview that he gave in the early 1980’s, Habiby commented on his early love for the premodern genre of *maqāma* and for the style and language of the Qur’ān.<sup>5</sup> One notices the influence of both in *Sa‘īd the Pessoptimist*. The influence of *maqāma* is reflected in the structure and format of the chapters. These tend to be short, self-contained accounts whose narrative and emotive effects turn on points of sarcastic social commentary and/or absurdist insight. It is this structure that inspired early readers of the novel to compare it with *Candide*, which shares these formal characteristics (cf. 117–21, trans. 72–75).

The influence of the Qur’ān constitutes a prominent strand in the mesh of historical and cultural intertextual allusions that permeate Habiby’s novel. Typical of this aspect of the text is Chapter One in which, within a page or two, Habiby refers to incidents and characters from the Qur’ān (the resurrection of Jesus, Moses’s staff, the peoples of Ād and Thamūd destroyed by God’s wrath), from Arab history (the Mamluk ruler Baibars), from folklore (the hero Abū Zayd

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<sup>5</sup> Interview in Robert B. Campbell, *Contemporary Arab Writers: Biographies and Autobiographies* (Beirut: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1996), 1:465.

al-Hilālī), from Roman history and Shakespeare (the Roman politician Brutus), and from recent political history (Lady Bird Johnson, wife of American President Lyndon B. Johnson). Although these references at first sight appear to span many centuries and diverse cultures, in fact throughout the novel the frame of reference is really contemporary and topical. Almost all of the events and figures to which Habiby refers would be well-known to any Arab who has completed secondary school. His references to past conquerors such as Tamerlane and the Crusaders, famous Arab travelers such as Ibn Jubayr, Muslim scientists and thinkers such as Ibn Firnās, Ibn Rushd, and al-Bīrūnī, Arab poets such as Imru' al-Qays, the *Arabian Nights* story of "The City of Brass," and characters from the plays of Shakespeare are neither recondite nor abstruse; most would be familiar to modern educated Arab readers.

What is unusual in Habiby's novel is the way he uses these historical and cultural references in pastiche, aiming through their juxtaposition to create humorous effect. His employment of intertextual references works through the contradiction of tone and context that they create. The loftiness of style and the magnitude of frame that they give the text are constantly undercut by the insipid and unimportant actions of the character of Sa'īd. As a result, the reader is "disfamiliarized" and estranged from taking either Sa'īd's life or references to the glories of Arab history too seriously. Habiby's ironic attitude toward canonical knowledge serves to subvert it. He continually contrasts lofty historical and cultural references from the school canon, which are intended to teach Arab schoolchildren about the greatness and nobility of their past, to the pathetic realities of Sa'īd's predicament, in which heroism or idealism are unrealistic expectations, since what is at issue in Sa'īd's life is less boldness and heroism than simple survival. In effect, Habiby uses the juxtaposition of intertextual references and Sa'īd's thoughts and actions to emphasize that although Palestinians are taught about kings, heroes, and great thinkers from the past, the daily realities they actually face are quite different. The gap between cultural rhetoric and current fact is too great. Hence, expecting someone like Sa'īd, who is less a hero than an anti-hero, the negation of heroic virtues, to emulate his glorious forebearers is ridiculously unrealistic.

## PARODY AND THE ABSURD

The tone of Habiby's novel fits the mode that Northrop Frye terms low-mimetic or ironic comedy.<sup>6</sup> Sa'īd is a "low" character, a weak, passive, dim-witted collaborator with no clear socially redeeming characteristics. As such, his proper fate in society should be exclusion; he should be an outcast. What makes Sa'īd's character ironic is his (and ours as readers) awareness that rather than being unusual, his behavior is typical of many Palestinians who for reasons of self-interest normalize the unusual situation in which they live. For Sa'īd and others like him, social alienation has become a natural state.

According to Frye's theory of the genre, a renewed sense of social integration is the goal of comedy (Frye, 43). Comedic characters typically begin their action by lacking social integration. The crux of the comedy's action is, therefore, to show how they manage to attain it. Their return to a state of social integration is what creates comedy's traditional "happy ending." The circumstances in which Sa'īd lives, however, preclude the possibility of attaining normality or social integration. The only way that he can obtain it is to create a completely new society. Hence, he ends by living outside of "normal" society. His "happy-ending" is self-imposed isolation from human society in outer space.

This disjuncture between the normal expectations of comedy and the realities of Sa'īd particular predicament pushes the novel's comedy toward the absurd. The circumstances of external historical reality prevent any real dramatic resolution. Sa'īd can become a hero and be killed or imprisoned (like Bāqiyya, Walā' or his double, Sa'īd the imprisoned resistance fighter), he can go into exile (like the two Yu'āds), or he can continue to live as he has done, submitting publicly to the wishes and dictates of the Israeli state. None of these alternatives represent a "happy ending." As a result, although Habiby's novel is humorous, it is not a comedy in the traditional sense. As with much modernist literature, its dark and pessimistic absurdist bent makes it more anti-comedy than comedy.

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<sup>6</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 43-48.

## CREATIVE HARMONY

The narrative codes that I have identified for purposes of critical analysis are intertwined in Habiby's novel. How they successfully work together and work off each other, how they complement and set each other off, is an essential component of the book's aesthetic success. We see in the novel a harmony of opposites. The larger linear structure of pseudo-autobiography contrasts with the short glancing form of anecdote. The emotive pathos of romance coexists with the work's low mimetic tones of social parody and modernist absurdism. Symbolic and allegorical representations are intermeshed with the realism of the novel's pseudo-autobiographical account of day to day event. References to historical greatness and cultural glory are played against the daily defeats and failures of Sa'īd's own character and life. All these aspects of the novel are held in balance by the amazing and unique figure of Sa'īd the Pessoptimist, narrative protagonist, wise fool, unfortunate lover, social commentator, political dupe, and modernist everyman all rolled into one.

The central importance of Sa'īd for holding together the complex narrative codes of the novel becomes more obvious when one examines Habiby's other fiction, none of which achieves the level of brilliance of *Sa'īd the Pessoptimist*. The *Sudāsīyyat al-Ayyām al-Sitta* (The Sextet of the Six Days [War], 1969) consist of six stories that offer situational vignettes, mostly centering on the opportunities for Palestinians living in Israeli again to meet with their West Bank compatriots as a result of Israel's acquisition of territory in 1967. A poor child, for examples, who believes that he has no relatives suddenly discovers that he is part of a wealthy West Bank family. Long forgotten love stories are brought to mind again through chance encounters. The streets of Jerusalem are once again accessible. In these vignettes, narrative voice is in first or third person, and each story is succinct and to the point. The collection's overall mood is elegiac rather than comic. Although these are fine stories, there is little in them to prepare the reader for what Habiby next wrote, *Sa'īd the Pessoptimist*, with its blistering wit, biting sarcasm, and complex multi-layered narrative, a novel that Trevor Le Gassick has described as "probably the most successful satire in Arabic."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Trevor Le Gassick, "The Luckless Palestinian: Review Article," *Middle East Journal* 34, 2 (1980): 223.

In his next major work, *Luka' ibn Luka': Thalāth Jalsāt amām Sandūq al-ʿAjab* (Luka', Son of Luka': Three Sessions Before the Treasure Chest of Wonders, 1980), Habiby turns to theater, casting the work in the form of a script. In this work, symbol and allegory dominate. All the main characters are symbols, each representing some aspect of the Palestinian dilemma. The principal character is a clown with his treasure chest of wonders, a traditional folk form consisting of a box into which spectators look at backlit pictures that the wandering storyteller uses as a prop while he relates his stories. The clown, representing the recorder of Palestinian history and the symbol of its aspirations, presides over other allegorical characters. Chief among these is the young woman, Badūr, who symbolizes occupied Palestine. She awaits the return of Badr, symbol for the heroic Palestinian youth who will liberate her. The thorough permeation of symbol and allegory in this work weakens its aesthetic effect. Symbols can be highly effective literary tools, since their emotive impact can provoke a strong and immediate emotional response. Nevertheless, they are by themselves unable to engage the reader's intellect and imagination throughout an extended narrative. By limiting himself in *Luka' ibn Luka'* to emphasizing only one of the narrative codes that we have seen in *Sa'īd the Pessoptimist*, the symbolic and allegorical, Habiby drastically weakens its artistic impact.

Habiby changes pace in his final two novels, *Ikhtiyā* (What a Shame!, 1985), and *Sarāyā Bint al-Ghūl* (Saraya, the Ghul's Daughter, 1992). In these works, he relies on first person narration and makes extensive use of topical and intertextual reference. In *Sarāyā* he even provides his own footnotes to ensure that the reader will catch all of his literary, cultural, historical, and topical allusions. What is lacking here is the existence of a strong narrative line and clear characters with whom the reader can identify. Stories can be subverted, fragmented, and commented on self-referentially, but when all of this destroys their narrative coherence and weakens their characters, when the reader no longer knows what the story is or who its main characters are, then we leave the genres of story and novel and move toward those of diary or essay. Such a departure from narrative sequence, plot, and character tends to make most readers who approach the work with expectations that they are reading a novel lose interest in the book. Attractive as these two novels are in many ways, they will not gain a broad audience. Only those who really

care about Emile Habiby's own thoughts, insights, and aesthetic goals will read them.

### CONCLUSION

One of the mysteries of literature (and of art as a whole) is the issue of our emotive response to and evaluation of individual works. Of the thousands of novels written each year across the globe, how is it that some attain popular fame, others receive the applause of astute readers and the praise of informed critics, while many are deemed insufficiently worthy and interesting by both classes of readers? In the corpus of one writer, why is one novel so obviously more artistically successful and aesthetically pleasurable than others?

These are difficult questions to answer, and they cannot be measured on a quantitative basis. My enumeration of narrative codes is not intended to suggest that mere multiplicity of such levels make *Sa'īd the Pessoptimist* a creatively successful novel. Nonetheless, it does serve to illustrate how complex and polysemous it is. The magic of the novel is the extent to which Habiby molded these diverse components into a unified whole in which each narrative code balances the others. It is this achievement of overall creative balance and aesthetic harmony in the novel that accounts for its artistic success.

Emile Habiby's other novels, interesting as they are, do not achieve this same level of creative success, partly because they are less ambitious in employing and balancing the narrative elements that he used to such good purpose in *Sa'īd the Pessoptimist*. One may also speculate that the particular state of mind in which Habiby began the novel influenced its creation. He once stated that he wrote the novel because otherwise he would have burst from sorrow after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. He has also remarked that he wrote the novel almost unconsciously: "A particular moment arrived, it seems, and I started writing without the slightest idea of where I was going, one that allowed the interior mind to take off on its own."<sup>8</sup> Whatever the influence of Habiby's mental and emotional state when he composed *Sa'īd the Pessoptimist*, there is little doubt that it is his masterpiece, one of the great creative novels of modern Arabic literature.

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted by Roger Allen in *The Arabic Novel*, 222.

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## FEMINISM IN REVOLUTION: THE CASE OF SAḤAR KHALĪFA

AIDA A. BAMIA

The history of the Palestinian liberation movements spanning from the pre-1948 debacle to the Intifada years, reveals the progressive involvement of women in the heart of the political action. Women's participation dates back to the days of the British mandate and was viewed as a path to achieve women's rights. The national struggle was indeed the great facilitator for women's emancipation, a golden opportunity that Palestinian women seized, militating on the national and the international arenas. Such a global concept was not for the weak of heart, such as 'Afāf, protagonist of *Mudhakkirāt Imra'a Ghayr Wāq'iyya* (Memoires of an Unrealistic Woman). She listened, in fear as Nawāl was defining her role under Israeli occupation: "‘Afāf is part of the Palestinian woman revolution and the Palestinian woman revolution is part of the Palestinian revolution and the Palestinian revolution is part of the world revolution".<sup>1</sup> This awareness guided the path of the Palestinian women in real life, as early as 1925, when Mary Shehadeh, a journalist was quoted saying: "I was extremely interested in the question of women mainly because of my belief that the status of women determines the status of a whole society."<sup>2</sup> She followed up on her conviction and militated through writing and lecturing for the emancipation of women not only in Palestine but in other Arab countries.

The dispersion of the Palestinian people after 1948 disrupted many of their established traditions. With the loss of the land, large, well-known families who had lived a semi-feudalistic life turned to education as a means to guarantee their livelihood and to achieve social

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<sup>1</sup> Saḥar Khalīfa, *Mudhakkirāt Imra'a Ghayr Wāq'iyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1986), 96. Other novels by Khalīfa are: *Lam Nā'ud Jawārī Lakum* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1988); *al-Subbār* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, n.d.); *‘Abbād al-Shams* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1987), 3rd ed.; *Bāb al-Sāḥa* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> 'Oraib 'Aref Najjār, *Portraits of Palestinian Women* (University of Utah Press), 262–63.

status. Girls were forced to work to support their families, sometimes in distant countries. This gave them an ascendancy over males, power and authority usually associated with men. Though education was prized among Palestinians before 1948, it became of a greater value in the diaspora. It was the tool that allowed Palestinians to compete in countries where their only right was their knowledge. Life in the exile was, in a certain way, a blessing in disguise and contributed, significantly to the emancipation of the Palestinian woman. The dispersion of the Palestinian families and their life in the midst of strange neighbors, far from the watching eyes of the extended family members diminished the paralyzing preoccupation with a girl's reputation. The geographical distances that separated the families broke the remaining links to the tribal mentality, giving the smaller family nucleus the possibility to achieve autonomy and escape the hegemony of the extended family. Moreover, many emigrant families found themselves in more emancipated societies and, anonymity helping, older women removed the heavy Ottoman Yashmak, replacing it with a simple scarf or nothing at all.

A double victim of colonialism and traditions, the Palestinian woman was also a scapegoat for men's despair and humiliations resulting from the occupation. Confronting a life of suffering and contradictions was a true challenge. Women saw in the national struggle an opportunity to assert themselves and achieve a certain degree of equality with men. They needed to prove to themselves too, their ability to assume this equality. To live the situation in theory, to be politicized, is only half the way. Many of the women who were actively involved with the Palestinian resistance in various Arab countries faced this reality. "I was in charge of the base for ten days . . . At first I was frightened of the responsibility but I forced myself to do more than I really could, to prove myself, . . ." <sup>3</sup> Women did not spare any effort to participate in the fight for their country's liberation.

Palestinian women became involved in their country's struggle at an early stage, in their opposition to the British mandate and the Zionist movement. Their participation and impact then, were lim-

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<sup>3</sup> Soraya Antonius, "Fighting on Two Fronts: Conversations with Palestinian Women", in *Third World Second Sex, Third World Women Speak*, Miranda Davies, ed. (London: Zed Books), 76.

ited to specific social and intellectual circles.<sup>4</sup> It is with the Intifada that the masses became involved, “Pre-Intifada, you rarely saw a woman being part of a demonstration,” explains a woman activist, “post-Intifada you would see demonstrations created solely for women to take part in them . . . Women did other things that used to be roles of males only, like going out and writing slogans or passing leaflets at night.”<sup>5</sup>

The Intifada provided the most favorable opportunity for a total involvement in the struggle while the urgency of the situation quelled men’s objections. Women took their natural place beside men, yet received no promises and offered no conditions. However, with the Algerian example in the back of their minds, the Palestinian women approached their involvement in the resistance movement with anticipation and caution. Fiction echoed reality as Rafif in *‘Abbād al-Shams* (Sunflower) exploded in anger against her male colleagues, “What will become of us? Will our fate be that of the Algerian woman after independence? . . . she struggled, carried arms and was tortured in the French prisons . . . Then what? They moved to the light and left her in the dark, as if freedom was good only for men. What about us, where is our freedom and how do we achieve it? But they will not fool us.”<sup>6</sup> The Algerian women’s experience was a lesson for Palestinian women who did not want merely to fill a need, even patriotic, but to crown their multiple long efforts in achieving a permanent status of equality.<sup>7</sup> While striving to fulfill this double aim the Palestinian women faced the illogical theory of relativity, where words and conducts were explained in light of the moment, leading thus to contradictory interpretations. This state of illogicality added to the confusion and anger of the women and is best typified by Ivette in *Lam Na’ud Jawārī Lakum* (We Are Not Your Slaves Anymore). Although immature and foolish in her actions and reactions, she nonetheless sheds light on the issue.

Of all the upheavals that marked the life of the Palestinians the

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<sup>4</sup> Most of the women’s activities were coordinated by the Arab Union of Palestinian Women.

<sup>5</sup> Staughton Lynd, Sam Bahour, and Alice Lynd, eds. *Home Land, Oral Histories of Palestine and Palestinians* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1994), 87–88.

<sup>6</sup> Saḥar Khalīfa, *‘Abbād al-Shams* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1987), 119.

<sup>7</sup> The distinction between a position and a status was pointed out by Najāh Manāṣrah as she explained the temporary nature of a role that can easily change, once the situation is resolved or reversed. Najjār, *Portraits of Palestinian Women*, 262–63.

Intifada had the most far reaching ripple effect in its ranks. It mushroomed inversely, starting at the top of the pyramid with children, and unavoidably stirring their parents' concern and interest. The event most particularly touched women's lives, however, not as indirect victims but as participants. The many oral histories of the Palestinian women testify to this involvement in the event that "exploded"<sup>8</sup> in their midst.

With the beginning of the struggle for national liberation most arguments used to maintain women within restricted enclaves became suddenly obsolete. The code of honor usually strictly enforced did not seem to matter anymore. Accounts given by Palestinian women reveal clearly that the new conditions changed society's traditional attitude vis-à-vis women's involvement. May Sayigh draws a parallel between the pre- and the post-civil war periods in Lebanon: "Before the civil war we offered literacy classes three times a week . . . Their men were opposed to this and we had to persuade them one by one . . . When things get bad and a war breaks out the women rush to classes because they feel enthusiastic and the husbands don't stand in their way during these times".<sup>9</sup> This remark was reiterated by other women, "After the battle of Karameh in March 1968, I joined Fateh and received military training," declared 'Abīr. "I spent the battles of 1970 at a military base, sleeping there—at that stage families didn't protest against this. But before it was different."<sup>10</sup> Fiction reflected largely this reality. In *Bāb Al-Sāḥa* (The Entrance to the Square) Nuzha ceased being an outcast when her brother was killed fighting the Israeli army. Her ill-reputed house tore at the seams with mourners honoring her brother's martyrdom and surrounding her with their affection. Her shunned house suddenly became a passage leading to patriotic deeds as women followed her through an underground walkway to reach the Israeli flag and to burn it. Nuzha herself rose in stature as she lit the match that engulfed the flag in flames. The destruction of the symbol of occupation marked the end of the concern with many traditions. Samar who had felt trapped when the curfew caught her in Nuzha's house, was the one who praised the latter's action, saying "You finally did it Nuzha!"<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Bahour Lynd, et al., *Home Land*, 95.

<sup>9</sup> Miranda Davies, *Third World Sex* (London: Zed Books, 1983), 73.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Saḥar Khalifa, *Bāb al-Sāḥa* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1990), 222.

Ironically, it is those who had ignored her and failed to respond to her greetings in public who took refuge in her house, as they faced life-and-death situations. This is where Zakiyya, the midwife spent several days caring for her wounded nephew and later received her distraught sister-in law. Gradually, she even viewed Nuzha in a different light, as a human being. "How did she fail to see that this girl was alone and that in her loneliness, she would cry, be scared and suffer! Isn't she made of flesh and blood? Is it because she is Sakina's daughter? Is it because she belongs to the ill-fated house?"<sup>12</sup> Highlighting Nuzha's humanity and generosity, Khalifa appears bent on breaking the taboos surrounding loose women, those with a bad reputation. Nuzha becomes the axis of the action, the center where women, and even men, break the hard mold of traditions, finding comfort and protection under her roof. Her character recalls that of Nūr in Najīb Maḥfūz's *Al-Liṣṣ wa 'l-Kilāb* (The Thief and the Dogs).

The Palestinian national movements coincided with a general atmosphere of equality and the call for emancipation that resonated around the world. Ironically, the increased abuses of the colonial policy while tightening the grip on the colonized, provided women with a window of opportunity as they became indispensable for the liberation movements. The motto "land before honor" prevailed, particularly in the early years of the Palestinian resistance against the Israeli occupation, and as the number of women prisoners grew. Soraya Antonius remarks, correctly, on the Palestinian women, stating that "the major efforts have been devoted to political, national ends, and the emancipation of women has come as an accidental consequence of their determination to carry out some political action, such as a demonstration, which entailed a flouting of conventional mores."<sup>13</sup> While the motivating national feeling justified and forgave the daring behavior, it served, more importantly, to propel women in the midst of action and give them visibility. A certain underlying sense of familiarity with women's involvement slowly developed, contributing thus to theirs and society's psychological preparedness.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>13</sup> Davies, *Third World Sex*, 63.

<sup>14</sup> In 1938 seven young women from Nablus collected donations for the national struggle against the British forces and the Zionist movement. The caption that accompanied the photo is of special significance. It read as follows: "For the first time in the history of this city rich in traditions, we see its brave women go out unveiled to collect donations from generous people and distribute them to the widows

Although the Intifada appeared as a sudden event, national consciousness and women's involvement were not totally unprepared.

During the Intifada women were not merely the helpers but also the protectors and the rescuers. Two examples of such occurrences in *Bāb al-Sāḥa* are a touching proof of this role. On two occasions Samar shielded two young men from the eyes of the Israeli patrol, first her neighbor Aḥmad, then her brother, the same brother who beat her brutally when she disappeared for nine days without informing her family. "Don't worry", she told him, "I shall stand by you, I shall stand in front of you and they won't see you".<sup>15</sup> Samar was also motivated by her ideology, her intellectual reasoning. Yet like the other women of "Bāb al-Sāḥa" she was the victim of the same condition (occupation) that put her on the way to emancipation. A double danger threatened this budding freedom, on the one hand, the change in men's mentalities vis-à-vis women's issues did not progress at the speed of the national struggle and, on the other hand, it was not clear whether men would support the concept of male-female equality. Samar's brothers made, continuously, fun of her revolutionary and socialist ideas, while 'Afāf was surprised by the stagnation of her school sweetheart's mentality. Their trajectories were unequally covered. While she had come full circle and decided to change her life, his outlook on women remained old-fashioned and reactionary. It was difficult for women to live their new found rights in a vacuum, however, yet accounts provided by militant women pointed to the slow change in society. Mahā Naṣṣār's parents' reluctance over her marriage to a militant was countered by a greater fear of seeing her single for life, "because not every man in this society would agree to be married to a woman who is politically active".<sup>16</sup>

Men feared to see militant women go beyond "acceptable" limits. Their apprehensions were justified, however, as the success of the Intifada gave women confidence and audacity, motivating them to

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and orphans of Palestine's righteous martyrs. Men lauded this action, moved by their *nationalist feelings* and contributed to their project *generously and willingly*." (Italics mine) *Al-Marʿa al-ʿArabiyya wa-Qaḍīyyat Filastīn, Al-Muʿtamar al-Nisāʾī al-Sharqī al-Munʿaqid bi Dār Jamʿiyyat al-Itihād al-Nisāʾī al-Miṣrī, Min 15 ilā 18 October, sanat 1938* (Cairo: Al-Maṭbaʿa al-ʿAṣriyya bi-Miṣr, 1939), 82. The book consists of a collection of speeches and other activities of the conference, with photos.

<sup>15</sup> Khalīfa, *Bāb al-Sāḥa*, 183.

<sup>16</sup> Lynd, Bahour, and Lynd, ed. *Home Land*, 93.

move further in the fight for their rights. Mahā Naṣṣār spoke of the intention “to change the civil laws concerning women” as well as to conduct “studies to prove how religion was an obstacle in the progress of women and to show the origins of the existing laws about marriage and inheritance, and so on.”<sup>17</sup>

In the unusual historical and political circumstances that surrounded the life of the Palestinian people, particularly in the diaspora, traditions lost much of their punch. In the bewildering change that followed their dispersion in the Arab countries and other parts of the world, women were faced with new and unusual responsibilities which they assumed quite successfully. The Intifada put another generation of women in a similar situation, with different aims and implications. There was also a new dimension in their lives, resulting from the close interaction between men and women in their militant activities. Love stories born among the militant youth left the women emotionally bruised, as they discovered in the homeland a powerful rival who always won. The men were most often on the move, fighting or hiding from the Israeli army. Angered by the loss of the man she loved Nuzha referred to the male militants as “tied”. When she held her dead brother Ahmed in her arms, she broke into a virulent attack on the “Ogress”—Palestine who took all those lives.

The militancy of the women of the Intifada had the novelty and freshness of actions formulated outside the traditional perimeters of revolutions fought by adults. If the adolescent and adult Algerian women shocked their male elders, the children of the Palestinian Intifada rallied the women of the country whose maternal instincts and unconditional love hovered over the stone throwers. The Intifada offered, in fact the most agreeable ground for women’s involvement in the national struggle, as sisters and as mothers. Thus Zakiyya in *Bāb al-Sāḥa* is the ideal character, a midwife who is everyone’s mother and a loving aunt who seemed closer to her nephew Husām than his own father. To the other fighting youths, she was the seeing eye, warning them of possible dangers and reporting the movements of the Israeli army. It is this increased emotional burden that Zakiyya referred to when Samar questioned her about the changes in her life, brought on by the Intifada. The choice of a midwife as one of the main characters (it is difficult to identify a protagonist in this

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

novel), conjures the centrality of the woman-mother during the Intifada, recalling one of Maḥmūd Darwīsh's powerful symbols. For this midwife every *fidā'ī* she helped bring to the world, is her son, which puts her at the center of their life and also their death. When she announced the death of a *fidā'ī* to his mother, the latter retorts: "Is he my son alone?! he is your son and mine, you pulled him out!"<sup>18</sup>

*Bāb al-Sāḥa* portrays the centrality of women's role in the Intifada. It stresses the role of the woman-mother and the woman-sister rather than the woman-wife. During a pursuit that led to a village, it was the women who threw stones and spread olives on the ground to delay the advance of the Israeli soldiers. They were the ones who transformed the death of a fighter into a celebration, launching a new tradition in uttering loud ullalations to commemorate the event, braking thus the barrier between life and death. Traditionally shunned because they could not perpetuate the family name, girls carried the torch of the national struggle. After Aḥmad's death, his sister Nuzha assumed his role and guided the women's action, "Come, let me show you how to get there,"<sup>19</sup> she told a group of young girls seeking to burn an Israeli flag. The ambiguity and intensity of the women's involvement is such that it is sometimes uncertain whether their support is motivated by their love for the brothers, the sons, the beloved, or for the homeland! If some did not have the audacity to express their thoughts aloud, Nuzha did in her usual, daring and frank language, "Not for the Ogress, but for Aḥmad's sake".<sup>20</sup>

While Khalīfa's characters reached their political and feminist maturity in *Bāb al-Sāḥa*, it is in a previous novel, *Mudhakkirāt Imra'a Ghayr Wāq'iyya*, that they became unquestionably aware of women's secondary position. They also realized the need for action. This is where 'Afāf's slow awakening began to take shape. She questioned her situation from the moment of her birth, considered a "calamity" for her family and through her adolescence when she existed solely as "the daughter of the inspector".<sup>21</sup> Using the frame of an unhappy marriage, Khalīfa portrays woman's life as a trap where her condition as woman places her. Driven by the fear of dishonor, parents

<sup>18</sup> Khalīfa, *Bāb al-Sāḥa*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

often exchange a daughter's happiness for their peace of mind, transferring their responsibility to a different man. They seem forgetful to the fact that this "burden" has feelings and a thinking mind. Taking away the apple (symbol of Adam's temptation?) of young 'Afāf, cutting it and eating it against her objection, was an example of society's denial of women's rights and individuality.

Once educated, women became a threat to this frail social system of relativity. They began questioning society's contradictory interpretation of the same conduct. The coin stopped having two faces. It was this realization that gave Samar in *Bāb al-Sāḥa*, finally, the courage to stand up to her brother, refusing to be beaten a second time. Gathering strength from the awareness of her education, her degrees, her position and her age, she viewed him in a different light.

The resistance and more particularly the Intifada broke the vicious cycle of double standards and relativity applied by society toward women. The change occurred on two levels in their lives, as participants and as victims. Their involvement made them subject to the brutalities and pursuits of the Israeli army. House searches broke the sanctity of the home as women "were insulted inside their bedrooms, women were embroiled in hand fights, shouted and swore, they grappled with the soldiers in their nightgowns, their hair disheveled."<sup>22</sup> The center of sanctity shifted from the religious to the temporal as they redefined their spiritual center, "Our country alone is our religion".<sup>23</sup>

There is behind the belligerent, defiant and "shameless" characters drawn by Saḥar Khalīfa, the woman-writer who experienced, in her personal life many of her characters' hardships. Khalīfa came to literature at the end of a fight for her own rights as a woman. Her literary production was the result of her emancipation and not a means to achieving it. She brought to literature the fruit of the rebirth of a woman who found her way in the already open path of the national struggle. Her familiarity with many of the roles played by her characters contributed to their realism. The road to emancipation traversed by Khalīfa's women characters echoing, in many ways her own, is portrayed throughout her novels. From an ideological position in *Lam Na'ud Jawārī Lakum*, to a struggle for survival

<sup>22</sup> Khalīfa, *Bāb al-Sāḥa*, 135.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

in *al-Subbār* (Wild Thorns), to a political awakening in *‘Abbād al-Shams* and to self-assertion in *Mudhakkirāt Imra’a Ghayr Wāqī’iyya*, the feminine characters traversed a rough road. It is the novel *Bāb al-Sāha* that epitomizes women’s involvement in the political action and shapes their new position in society. The Intifada which “didn’t just happen instantaneously”,<sup>24</sup> was the catalyst that combined past efforts and reversed old rules, fulfilling the predicaments of postmodernism, considered feminism’s natural ally as both “developed new paradigms of social criticism.”<sup>25</sup> Women of all walks of life took matters into their own hands and challenged their double oppressors, discovering the benefits of women’s solidarity on the way. Facing the brutality of the occupation, particularly against their children, motivated women into action, unconcerned by men’s opinions. “We act as one. We share . . . We are in solidarity with each other”, explained Amal Deeb whose children were detained during the Intifada.<sup>26</sup>

Khalifa’s message is obvious, women must seek their fulfillment in themselves, through their own achievements and not through others, a father, a brother, a husband, or even a child. This is at the core of her feminist position together with the crucial need for financial independence. ‘Afāf, the protagonist of *Mudhakkirāt Imra’a Ghayr Wāqī’iyya*, whose attachment to an unloved husband was motivated by purely material reasons, represents scores of women in real life who remain in an unhappy or abusive marriage, to guarantee their livelihood. A striking example is Umm ‘Azzām’s aborted revolt against her husband’s abuses, fighting for her dignity as a human being. This daughter of a rich merchant, married to a wealthy merchant, was willing to exchange a secure life for that of a maid in her sister-in-law’s house. “How lucky you are, how lucky”<sup>27</sup> she told Zakiyya, this mother of six who had to struggle to survive with her daughters after her husband abandoned her. The latter had never dreamt of becoming, one day, the subject of envy! ‘Afāf too, finally understood. Her friend, Nawāl aware of her escapist tactics, exploded as she listened to her talking about her desire to change her life, “But when ‘Afāf, when?”<sup>28</sup> The Intifada underscored this need and

<sup>24</sup> Lynd, Barhour and Lynd, *Home Land*, 85.

<sup>25</sup> Alisson Assister, *Enlightened Women, Modernist Feminism in a Postmodern Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Lynd, et al., *Home Land*, 95.

<sup>27</sup> Khalifa, *Bāb al-Sāha*, 163.

<sup>28</sup> Khalifa, *Mudhakkirāt Imra’a Ghayr Wāqī’iyya*, 108.

precipitated the action on the part of the women who were faced then with a *fait accompli*. "The Palestinian woman", explained a member of the generation of the Intifada, "knows that she can't count on the presence of a man. He may die as a martyr, be imprisoned, be exiled, live underground or just disappear in struggle . . . the woman had to play the male role as well as the female role."<sup>29</sup> This position is shared by other women who militated in the Intifada. One of them, Mahā Naṣṣār explains: "The Intifada gave us a new life. Our feminist ideas started growing up".<sup>30</sup> Nawāl in *Mudhakkirāt Imra'a Ghayr Wāqī'iyya* had this situation in mind when she declared to 'Afāf, "Only those like you and me would be capable of revolt".<sup>31</sup> The women of the Intifada shaped, in a way, this revolt. Whether organized through women committees or independently, it seemed impossible for anyone to remain indifferent to this major event or escape its ramifications.

Parallel to the portrayal of women's involvement in the political action, Khalīfa undertook the criticism of the customs and traditions of her society as hampering factors in women's emancipation. She seems concerned with the misconceptions of society toward beautiful, unmarried women who were always a subject of suspicion without a cause. There is Sa'diyyeh in *'Abbād al-Shams*, 'Afāf's childhood neighbor in *Mudhakkirāt Imra'a Ghayr Wāqī'iyya* and Sakīna in *Bāb al-Sāha*. The writer ridicules a society whose definition of dishonor is lopsided, as it seems more concerned with the honor of single women than the dishonor of living under occupation. The issue is dramatized in the story related by 'Afāf's neighbor in *Mudhakkirāt Imra'a Ghayr Wāqī'iyya* about a woman who put "land before honor". Her father who was first told that his daughter was meeting with young men in the middle of the night, found out that she was a member of the armed resistance. Eager to inform his society of her innocence, he went around explaining the nature of her nightly activities till word reached the authorities. Fifty young men paid with their lives the price of his daughter's restored honor!

The bourgeoisie was condemned for its haughty and discriminatory attitude toward the poor, particularly in *Lam Na'ud Jawārī Lakum*. The lingering haughty mentality of the old but broken families is

<sup>29</sup> Lynd, Bahour and Lynd, eds. *Home Land*, 87.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>31</sup> Khalīfa, *Mudhakkirāt Imra'a Ghayr Wāqī'iyya*, 106.

depicted in *al-Subbār* through the al-Karmī family. The demolition of their family house with dynamite symbolically portrays the end of this social class. The family itself had disintegrated internally long before this event, as the children were leading their own life and were involved in activities that the parents would have never allowed. In a world where everything was crumbling, where lives were at stake, including those of his children, the father, the old al-Karmī seemed pathetic in demanding respect from his family. His preoccupation with the family reputation and “what would people say about the kingdom of al-Karmī”,<sup>32</sup> were his only thoughts when he learned about his daughter’s involvement with a *fidāʿī*.

What makes Khalīfa’s characters real is the absence of heroism in their attitude and a semblance of weakness that transpires through their hesitation in various situations. Thus when the question of women’s emancipation is presented as part of the whole struggle for Palestine by a militant friend, ‘Afāf flinches and longs for the security of her married, yet unhappy life. She is hesitant, afraid and apprehensive and seems willing to maintain the status quo rather than take charge of her life.

In the spirit of the postmodernist movement which advocates “mass culture”,<sup>33</sup> Khalīfa gave her characters, particularly Nuzha, total freedom of expression. There, the author is more concerned with “real” rather than polite language, as Nuzha’s uninhibited speech and normally shocking words fill the space of the novel.

The evolution of Khalīfa’s women characters moved from the inner to the outer struggle; without finding themselves, they would not have been able to serve their national cause, without fulfilling themselves they could not have fulfilled their national duty. ‘Afāf symbolizes this right of passage through her trip to the occupied territories. She would cross the bridge the moment she is prepared to assume her responsibilities.

Khalīfa wants also to make a statement about society in relation to women, as the great concern with women’s reputation paralyzed women’s lives and put huge constraints on them, “a country that taught me how to accept oppression while it called it protection and realism”,<sup>34</sup> reflects ‘Afāf. As long as love/marriage was a refuge, it

<sup>32</sup> Khalīfa, 170.

<sup>33</sup> Assister, *Enlightened Women*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> Khalīfa, *Mudhakkirāt Imraʿa Ghayr Wāqīʿyya*, 109.

held women back and emancipation could not take place. Yet when women decided to face those who tied their hands behind their backs in the name of protection, there was hope.

The political thinking of the older generation of Palestinians, personified by al-Karmī in *al-Ṣubbār*, the impoverished land owner living on false hopes and past glories, is also condemned. Al-Karmī like his peers, was lulled by promises from Arab leaders to liberate Palestine and believed in the UN resolutions giving the Palestinians the right to return. His children, particularly Bāsīl who symbolizes the younger generation, understood the need for Palestinians to assume their own responsibilities. Ghassān Kanafānī conveyed the same lesson in *ʿĀ'id ilā Hayfā* (Return to Haifa).

It is obvious that the dismantling of the Palestinian society and its dispersion revealed its ills as well as the need for change and solutions; it was “. . . the Jews who uncovered our shield and divulged our secrets”<sup>35</sup> observes ʿAfāf. Following a trend began by Ghassān Kanafānī in *ʿĀ'id ilā Hayfā* and in line with the more enlightened post-colonial critical studies, Khalīfa confronted the Palestinian society with its responsibilities. The fictional discourse stood on the opposite end of the political discourse which blamed the colonial powers for any shortcoming. This position is underscored in Lenin al-Ramlī's play *Bil-ʿArabī al-Faṣṭḥ* (In Plain Arabic),<sup>36</sup> which ridicules this kind of political escapism among Arab leaders. It is not a coincidence that the triggering element in the action was the disappearance of a Palestinian student.

Though fully aware of the Israeli role in the degradation of conditions in her society, Khalīfa casts a critical look at her people not to condemn them but to help them assume their responsibilities. Lessons abound in her novels, expressed, mostly through her socialist ideology in less than subtle ways. She seems to imply that women will save the future, after men have destroyed the past, a prospect to watch.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Cairo: al-Markaz al-Miṣrī al-ʿArabī, 1992.

HISTORY, RELIGION, AND THE CONSTRUCTION  
OF SUBJECTIVITY IN ELIAS KHOURY'S  
*RIHLAT GHĀNDĪ AL-ŞAGHĪR\**

SABAH GHANDOUR

In his article "Cultural Creation in a Fragmented Society,"<sup>1</sup> Kamal Abu Deeb contends that Arab society should be analyzed within a larger picture of socioeconomic and political structures, specifically in the context of "successive Arab failures" and the internal divisions and conflicts within the society itself. He also explains how "the characteristics of Arabic writing, particularly on the level of its structure, have been determined by an intensifying process of fragmentation in the various spheres of life."<sup>2</sup> To put it differently, this fragmentation is inevitably bound to affect the formations of social and political institutions, the economic and class structure, and mainly our readings of history and tradition.

Against such a backdrop of social and political upheavals, of fragmentations on many levels of the Lebanese state as a result of the civil war (1975–1990), Elias Khoury's *Rihlat Ghāndī al-Şaghīr*<sup>3</sup> should be analyzed and appreciated. On one hand, Khoury's writing has to contend not only with writing about the present but also with the present. By this I mean he has to write in the midst of war and destruction, where writing becomes a process and a discovery of things, and not a word of gospel that embodies the absolute truth. For the moments of enunciation and/or writing about events are

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\* An abridged version of this article was published as a "Foreword" to Elias Khoury's *The Journey of Little Ghāndhī* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

<sup>1</sup> Kamal Abu Deeb, "Cultural Creation in a Fragmented Society," in *The Next Arab Decade: Alternative Futures*, ed. Hisham Sharabi (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 160–81.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>3</sup> Elias Khoury, *Rihlat Ghāndī al-Şaghīr* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ādāb, 1989); *The Journey of Little Ghāndhī*, tr. by Paula Haydar (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). The references to this novel will be included in the text. The first Arabic numeral refers to the Arabic version, the second to the English translation. I will be using the Arabic transliteration for "Ghāndī" instead of its English counterpart, "Gāndhī."

still in the making, shifting alliances and changing gears. On the other hand, Khoury's means of expression is Arabic, a language that is saturated with various debates he has inherited, along with other writers of his generation, about the function of the language. These debates which appear to be about the proper use of language, colloquial or modern standard Arabic, are in fact about which linguistic idiom best represents authentic Arab experiences, or the spirit of the nation.<sup>4</sup> Khoury, then, has to contend with the complexity and history of the language while at the same time he needs to write about the lived experiences of the Lebanese civil war.

When his novel *Al-Jabal al-Ṣaghīr* (*Little Mountain*) appeared in French in 1987, Khoury expressed his concern about a certain type of reader who tends to reduce any translated text to a mere historical or anthropological document of the source culture.<sup>5</sup> Such reductionist readings usually treat the text as a transparent cipher of political and ideological positions. Although one cannot disregard the specificity of any literary text, one should be very careful not to read a text as a mere reflection of events taking place, for example, in the streets of Beirut. Khoury's writing problematizes such readings, and his novels resist being reduced to sociological studies. His writing refuses, in Hayden White's words, "incorporation into conventionalized notions of 'reality,' 'truth,' or 'possibility'."<sup>6</sup>

In "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," Hayden White differentiates between two types of discourse. The first type is a discourse that narrates, "it adopts openly a perspective on the world and reports it." The second is a discourse that narrativizes; "it feigns to make the world speak itself . . . as a story."<sup>7</sup> In other words, Hayden White draws our attention to the difference between narratives which project monologic world views and adopt "openly a perspective on the world," and those narratives whose events seem to tell themselves; they appear to have neither logical unfolding nor causal connection between the episodes as we will see

<sup>4</sup> I have discussed this issue in detail in my "Foreword" to Elias Khoury's *Gates of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> An interview with Elias Khoury in *Al-Nahār al-Arabī wa al-Dawlī* (May 25th, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 7.

in *Rihlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr*. In this novel, Elias Khoury achieves two goals: firstly, by situating himself inside the narrative, the explicit narrator-author not only dismisses the idea of the god-like author who knows everything, but also marginalizes him by not allowing him to know more than what, for example, the readers or other characters know at a specific moment in the narrative. Secondly, by doing so, Khoury is inviting us, the readers, to discover Ghāndī's "journey" and to participate in the act of reading/writing. This technique which "feigns" to strip the narrator-author from his authoritative role, allows this novel to appear as if it narrates itself "as a story." *Rihlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr*, then, could be characterized as an "open y text" as defined by Kamal Abu Deeb, "It is an unmolded text. By its refusal to be molded, the text refuses to become a rite for authority's practice."<sup>8</sup> In such a text, the author no longer provides us with absolute truth and verities, and we have to discover the different meanings of events as we read.

The novel opens with the death of Ghāndī in the summer of 1982, during the Israeli invasion of Beirut.<sup>9</sup> It, then, proceeds to tell of the "journeys" of Ghāndī and many others. The reader, however, soon discovers that the *rihla* (journey) of the title has no grand halo about it, like the travelogue narratives of the classical literature. The traditional meaning of *rihla*, as Abdelfattah Kilito notes, represents on one level a "quest" for knowledge and discovery like those travels presented by Ibn Khaldūn or Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. Kilito further observes that it is hard to dissociate the concept of a *rihla* from that of *sīra dhātīyya* (autobiography) because both terms imply a good deal of narration.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the grand narratives of Ibn Khaldūn or Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Rihlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* presents the travels of a very ordinary man, a shoe shiner, 'Abd al-Karīm Ḥusn al-Aḥmadī, nick-named Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr (Little Ghāndī). The "journey" of Ghāndī, however, denotes on one level, the consecutive movements, jobs or occupations that Ghāndī got involved with from the time when he left his birth place "Mashta Hasan" in the north, moved to Tripoli then to Beirut where he ended up working as a shoe shiner. On another level, as Khoury notes elsewhere, writing is a journey "towards the

<sup>8</sup> Kamal Abu Deeb, "Al-Ḥadātha, al-Sulṭa, al-Naṣṣ," *Fuṣūl* vol. 4, no. 3 (1984): 46.

<sup>9</sup> "That day, the war became masks on people's faces. When people became masks with no eyes, walking like zombies through the city streets." (17,13).

<sup>10</sup> 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Kilītū (Abdelfattah Kilito), *Al-Ḥikāyah wa l-Ta'wīl: Dūrāsāt fī al-Sard al-'Arabī* (Morocco: Dār Tubqāl, 1988), 734.

known and the unknown . . . Writing indicates a way of life and not a lesson filled with ideology."<sup>11</sup> In other words, writing has become an exploration into and a discovery of things. This novel, which defies summary because of its embedded stories, explicitly draws our attention to the act of narrating and writing. Little Ghāndī's "journey," as we will see, is a metaphor for writing, exploration, and discovery.

*Rihlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* differs in its method of narration from other novels dealing with the Lebanese civil war. This departure from the traditional narrative mode leads to a change in the narrative structure of the novel.<sup>12</sup> *Rihlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* consists of seven chapters that differ in their length. The first chapter consists of five pages<sup>13</sup> while the second chapter almost doubles the first, consisting of eleven pages; the third chapter consists of twenty-four pages and so on. Then the chapters begin to shrink till we reach the last one which consists of two pages only. This cyclical structure is inextricably intertwined with the contents of the novel, with the "journeys" that the characters undertake. The beginning and ending of the novel telling of the death of Little Ghāndī do not require an enormous space but an abridged one because the moment of death is in itself a moment of disruption that terminates life. This moment of oblivion, however, does not end the process of telling stories about, for example, Ghāndī. On the contrary, Ghāndī's death opens up the space for various stories to be told about him.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the "journeys" of Little Ghāndī and others constituting the bulk of the narrative, require a more substantive space to contain the various incidents and events. As we plunge deeper in the narrative, we encounter numerous stories and surprises as if we were opening a Pandora's box, or a Russian doll, or reading a folk narrative.

We read in the first page of the novel, "I'm telling the story and it hasn't even ended yet. And the story is nothing but names. When I found out their names, I found out the story" (7,1). The many stories narrated in *Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* are connected by proper nouns; we move from one story to another, from one incident to another

<sup>11</sup> Elias Khoury, "The Unfolding of Modern Fiction and Arab Memory," *MMLA*, 23 (1990): 7.

<sup>12</sup> See my "Foreword" to Elias Khoury's *Gates of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xv-xvi.

<sup>13</sup> The reference here is to the Arabic text which the English translation generally matches.

<sup>14</sup> "Ḥiwār ma'a Elias Khoury," *Al-Adab*, vol. 41, no. 7-8 (July-August, 1993): 71.

by mere mentioning of names and associations. The narrator-author asks and investigates but he keeps “finding holes in the story.” As we read, we find out along with the narrator that the real story is one of life and death since it concerns those who couldn’t escape from the atrocities of the civil war and the Israeli invasion. The real story is that of Ghāndī, Alice, the narrator, and many others, who are obliged to live in the midst of war; they either survive or perish. So the story equals life, with all its wonderful and horrifying surprises, with its expected and unexpected events, with its sweetness and bitterness.

Are we then reading stories that in their form and the delineation of incidents are similar to the stories told by Shahrazad to King Shahrayar? (*A Thousand and One Nights*)? What is the frame-story presented by the novel? Does this comparison between Ibn Baṭṭūṭa and *Rihlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* end with the structure of the novel or does it go beyond that? Shahrazad tells stories to save her life and to provide another chance for the tyrant to reconsider his verdict. Who buys life in *Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* when we know that most of the characters in this novel die or disappear? Does life within this context equal writing and creativity? Why did Elias Khoury choose this narrative structure for his novel?

The principal frame for this novel is the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, specifically its invasion of Beirut. This war atmosphere provides the main backdrop, in that it grants or denies the characters life and death. Ghāndī was killed when the Israelis reached Beirut on the 15th of September 1982. Alice, the prostitute, disappeared during the 1984 events in Beirut.<sup>15</sup> These historical events are contained within this frame. Invasion in this context equals death, and writing after the nightmare of invasion provides life and recreates the memory of individuals and groups. A second frame which is equally important, represents the narrator-author as a character in the novel. This frame intertwines with the third represented by Alice who tells the stories to the narrator till she disappears in 1984.

Many incidents originate from the last two frames. The narrator

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<sup>15</sup> The opposition forces, Amal, Progressive Socialist Party, and other leftist groups reclaimed West Beirut pushing out the forces loyal to President Amin al-Jemayyel. See Tabitha Petran, *The Struggle over Lebanon* (N.Y.: Monthly Review Press, 1987), 345–369.

looks for Alice so that she can tell him about Little Ghāndī's "journeys", for Little Ghāndī has met Alice by chance and told her his stories. Through Little Ghāndī via Alice we know the story of his son Husn, his work as a hair dresser and his relationships with women just as we learn about many other stories. We move from one story to another, from one incident to another; there is no logical or chronological connection except for the fact that they are connected by names. This distinction in narration which resembles that of *Alf Layla wa-Layla* captures the daily lived experiences presented in the stories about various characters. These experiences are, in turn, manifested by the different languages which go beyond the classic distinction between standard and colloquial Arabic as Muḥammad Barrāda observes. The multi-leveled languages: the written memory, the forgotten memory, the church, the orientalist, the macho, and other languages, which go along with the "tricks" of narration, give us one of the avenues for reading the text.<sup>16</sup>

The language of a novel is the system of its "languages," as Bakhtin notes.<sup>17</sup> In *Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr*, we do not find a language that tells mere facts as is the case in traditional novels, for in the modern novel, language has abandoned its declamatory phrases.<sup>18</sup> Even when the narrator reports a certain incident, his language is filled with questionings and ambiguities:

I met Abd al-Karim by coincidence, but [Alice], I don't know how I met her. Abd al-Karim, nicknamed Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr, was a shoe shiner. He never shined my shoes, but everyone had told me about him. I ran into him once and we talked for a long time. But her, I don't know, maybe another coincidence (9,3).

Moreover, each of the languages employed in *Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* has its own function which is related to the social status of the speaker and the topic. What is important about these languages is their being "dialogical,"<sup>19</sup> and within this dialogue we can find out the nexus,

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad Barrada, "Al-Ta'adud al-Lughawī fil-Riwāya al-'Arabiyya," *Mawāqif* 69 (Autumn 1992): 173.

<sup>17</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 262.

<sup>18</sup> Ṣabri Ḥafez, "Al-Riwāya wa l-Wāqī'," *Al-Nāqid* 26 (August 1990): 39.

<sup>19</sup> In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Volosinov states that "any true understanding is dialogic in nature" (102). This means that in order for us to understand any other person's utterances, we have to orient ourselves with respect to that utterance by situating ourselves in the proper context of the dialogue. In *Riḥlat Ghāndī*

between these languages and the lived experiences. For example, when the dog of Mr. Davies, the American philosophy professor at the American University of Beirut, dies after being run over by a car, and after the car's driver has spat at the dog saying "it's only a dog," Mr. Davies feels that "the East is barbaric. If not for India and the real Ghāndī, the East would've remained barbaric" (41,37). Mr. Davies who has lived for a long time in Lebanon and tried to speak Arabic with a Beirut accent, and who has loved the East, its "spices" and the Arabs, was not able to understand the behavior of the car driver nor to comprehend the "other's" point of view. This failure to understand the "other" in the midst of this "other" immediate environment has driven Mr. Davies to use stereotypical phrases about the East, instead of questioning the failure of his project in this East which he has, in Edward Said's words, "oriented." For the East has become to him anecdotes about the spices and the Arabs. This incident implicates the generalized language about the Arabs and demonstrates the failure of those who adopt such a language. Moreover, the dialogue that takes place between Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr and Reverend Amīn is another example proving that language is unable to convey its intended meaning:

"Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." "What do you mean by blessed?" Ghāndī asked. "Blessed means how lucky they are. How lucky you are, Ghāndī, because you saw the green horse. No one but John the Baptist has ever seen that horse." "Send my best to John the Baptist, your eminence." (37,33)

Little Ghāndī's answer demonstrates his inability to understand Reverend Amīn's rhetorical language. Despite Reverend Amīn's endeavor to use standard and colloquial Arabic in this dialogue, he is not able to explain religious beliefs to Ghāndī in a simplified accessible vocabulary. Language, instead of being a means of communication and understanding, becomes an obstacle to its intended purpose. Here discourse does not reflect a certain situation; it is in itself a situation.<sup>20</sup> While Mr. Davies understands the world from a cultural angle, Reverend Amīn understands it from a religious and class perspective. Reverend Amīn who believes that "America [is] the model

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*al-Ṣaghīr* Mr. Davies was not able to understand why the driver has spat at the dog as we see in this episode. The dog is considered in Muslim tradition to be "impure."

<sup>20</sup> Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (N.Y. & London: Routledge, 1990), 63.

of this new world that Christ [has] saved” hates the simple life which the Americans call for. Little Ghāndī feels that he cannot understand his own language especially when the young bearded American youth, who “discovered the simple life through Ghāndī,” (131,124) speaks Arabic.

God grant you a long life, Reverend. You all speak English and I don't understand a word. This, whatever his name is, starts speaking Arabic like he's speaking English and I don't understand a word. I . . . (132,125)

As this novel problematizes language and its function for us, it also shakes the reader's whole concept of what religion, as a system of beliefs and practices, is all about. In a style, that is sometimes burlesque, at other times serious, Khoury presents the episodes, in an irreverent manner.<sup>21</sup> The story of the senile old Christian woman presents a good example of such a style. The episode goes that this bedridden woman who suffers from a stroke, wakes up one night screaming, claiming that she has seen the Prophet Muḥammad in her dreams; she starts describing the Prophet in detail, “My Beloved, O Muḥammad, dark, tall, his mustache twirled upward, he had a staff with him, he poked me and said, You will get up” (108,103). The Muslim neighbors who hear her reiterating these words, rush into her room to get her blessings. The woman becomes holy and her room a sanctuary for the Muslims until she dies. Here a debate rages between her Christian siblings and her Muslim neighbours about her burial. Finally, they reach a compromise where the woman would have a Muslim coffin and a Christian burial. By looking at this episode, one cannot help but question the motive for relating such an incident. It is not as it would appear on a superficial level, that the novelist is making fun of the religious verities that we live by; on the contrary, his project is far more demanding on the part of the reader/listener. Khoury is projecting the writing activity as an open text, as mentioned earlier, where no truth is already out there ready to be picked up and adopted, but one has to discover it and scrutinize it as one reads on.

The discourse of religion is carried further in *Rihlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr*. As we read we discover how religion is sometimes used for one's

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<sup>21</sup> Edward Said, “Foreword,” to Elias Khoury's *Little Mountain*, tr. by Maia Tabet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xix.

convenience, as a means for survival. The father of Reverend Amīn, who converted to Protestantism from Catholicism, believes that “If it hadn’t been for this new Christian denomination, we’d have died of hunger like dogs” (104,99). Further, when he tells his wife that he has changed his sectarian affiliation and that she has to learn the new one, she said, “she didn’t have to because all religions were the same to her” (104,99). Here, the criticism is so poignant, one changes his/her sect as if one is moving from one apartment to another, for a more suitable place, to have a better standard of living. Religion in this episode is understood as a means of survival. The wife’s answer, however, that “all religions [are] the same” is the real crux of the issue. Religions have their own idiosyncracies, their own superstitions or practices, so to adopt a new religion is not such an important issue with respect to Reverend Amīn’s mother who keeps practicing the old ways—using the Byzantine icons familiar to Eastern Catholics—to perform her prayers and rituals in the privacy of her own room.

As *Rihlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* challenges our understanding of religion, it also defies our unitary understanding of subjectivity. This novel presents characters that are constantly being constructed according to circumstances. For example, Ḥusn, Ghāndī’s son, drops out of school because he is “not good.” While working in a beauty salon as a cleaning boy, he changes his name to Ralph. Then, with the war, he changes his name again to Ghassān. It is important to note that these shifts in naming occur at particular historical junctures, indicating this man’s awareness of the circumstances around him. Each of Ḥusn’s three names denotes a specific meaning. He changed his name at first from Ḥusn, an outmoded name, and then to Ralph in order to be accepted in the westernized urban atmosphere of Beirut. Once the war has started, he changes his name again to Ghassān, a secular Arab name that is neither westernized nor sectarian, a name that is familiar to both Christians and Muslims without suggesting any religious affiliation.

Another example is that of Rīma, Ḥusn’s girl-friend whose subjectivity is constituted by her use of language. While Ghāndī feels alienated from his language, Rīma does not. Rīma speaks as if “putting distances between her words” (48,45). Rīma uses three languages each day. She speaks German with her German mother; French at work; and Arabic with her friends. Rīma never questions her use of these three languages. Put differently, Rīma’s character or

her identity is constituted by and among these languages and thus her subjectivity challenges the unitary understanding of the term. In fact, Rīma's subjectivity shows that the distinction between the language expressing that subjectivity and the lived situation is indeed blurred and unclear. Does the text tell us that the identity is disintegrating or incomplete because Beirut, the city in which all the characters lived, is the one that travels from "the Switzerland of the Middle East to Hong Kong to Saigon, to Calcutta to Sri Lanka. As if we roamed the world in ten or twenty years. We stayed where we are and the world revolved around us" (10,5). In this text, Beirut is not only a metropolis where the novel's events take place, but also a major character in this novel; its importance supersedes that of Little Ghāndī. As Kamal Abu Deeb notes, "Life itself is the heroine. The place and the people whom Elias Khoury narrates to us about them are the heroes because they survive."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the movement of Beirut from Switzerland to Sri Lanka reveals that these places mark a difference in time and not in father taking him to the same cave when he was a young boy to punish him for misbehaving. Little Ghāndī, in the process of telling Alice these two stories, mixes them up believing himself to be the hero of both episodes.<sup>23</sup> These episodes show that a good deal of imagination plays in the recreation of incidents from memory. Put differently, memory has its own history which helps in constituting the individuals and groups.<sup>24</sup>

In "Writing the Present," Elias Khoury observes that Arabic creative writing has to contend with two "miracles" represented by "the bygone past and the nonexistent future," in order to be able to write the present. He demonstrates his argument with an anecdote about Abū Nuwās and Khalaf al-Aḥmar where Khalaf teaches Abū Nuwās how to become a creative poet by first memorizing poems and then forgetting what he has memorized. In this way, Khalaf, prescribes two important "mirrors": memory and forgetfulness, as indispensable

<sup>22</sup> Kamal Abu Deeb, "Al-Naṣṣ wa l-Ḥaqīqa," *Mawāqif* 69 (Autumn 1992): 158.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Said differentiates between "beginnings" and "origins." The first term involves an activity which entails production of meanings with respect to a certain beginning, while the second term has a more passive meaning than beginning. Origins are in a sense divine. See E. Said, *Beginnings: Intention & Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory & History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989), 7–25.

for creative writing. It is worth quoting Khoury's argument in its entirety:

Literary writing is not an ordered version of reality; the story is not actually the event. It is the event in remembrance and recreation. When the event turns into a story, it takes for itself its own history, considering it as awareness of the lived moment, at once separation from it and designation of it. This separation and designation, which we call the literary lie, is the truth. The writer does not look for the truth outside himself. The truth is not ready-made. It is made and told. Telling it is one of the forms of making it.<sup>25</sup>

Thus Elias Khoury unravels his creative process for us. Because of remembrance and forgetting, the incidents which Alice narrates are clouded with obscurity. The narrator-author, that is, the receiver/listener, writes them down for us as he hears them. But writing becomes a sort of betrayal of the very truth it tries to convey since it is at the same time a kind of truth. Recording incidents, instead of confirming their validity, shrouds them in doubt. How can we explain the Indian Ghāndī bestowing some goats on the Palestinian leader, Hājj Amīn al-Ḥusaynī? Although we have two important historical figures in this piece of information, what is important is the transformation of an event into a story by the "mirror" of remembrance, and in this particular event by association too. The narrator-author who remembers this event problematizes the story for us by leaving us to wonder about its validity and the rigid concepts of truth and falsehood.

We do not find any absolute truth in this novel. For as Sabry Hafez notes regarding the modern novel all verities have disappeared and relativity prevails.<sup>26</sup> For example, we read: "I discovered that the things Alice told me weren't lies" (8,2); "But Gandhi didn't believe her, nor did I" (45,41); "We're all like that. We believe in what we say. And when I try to write what they told me, I discover that Alice was right" (118,112); "Alice completed the lie" (194,180).

It is difficult while reading these statements to distinguish between truth and falsehood. The story of Abū 'Abbās al-Yatīm and the his-

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<sup>25</sup> "Kitābat al-Ḥādir," in *al-Safīr*, October 11, 1986. Khoury translated this article into English. It appeared in *Emergences, the Journal of the Group for the Study of Composite Cultures*, 2 (Spring 1990): 9.

<sup>26</sup> Sabry Hafez, *ibid.*

tory of ‘Ayn al-Mraysi, a coastal neighborhood in Beirut, is another proof of the difficulty of unraveling the riddle and discovering what really happened. When Abu ‘Abbās tells the story of the Italian nun and how she walked on water in ‘Ayn al-Mraysi, he holds a book in his hand saying “the history of ‘Ayn al-Mraysi [is] in [this] book” (144,136). When Alice accuses him of being a “world-class swindler,” he responds:

“I am a swindler. That’s what they want. They want information. Since this became a bar area, there’s been a need for a history, they all want to know the history. What is history? Miracles and strange happenings, since the time of Saint Adam peace be upon his soul, history is miracles and strange events.” “But you’re lying to them.” “If I lie, they believe me, If I don’t lie, they don’t believe me. But I don’t lie; I say what I’ve heard, and what I’ve heard is true, because I heard it, right?” (146,138)

Hayden White observes that both the novelist and the historian try to provide a verbal image of “reality.” He maintains that the historian usually employs the techniques of the orator and the poet, and suggests that works of fiction “not only be *about* their putative subject matter, but also *about* language itself and the problematical relation between language, consciousness, and reality—including the writer’s own language.”<sup>27</sup> *Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* problematizes the notion of history and its traditional status as being unquestionable. It further contests the relationship between history and truth and whether history when written down becomes a holy book. It is incorrect to believe that language is merely the carrier of truth. Language does not reflect reality in a mechanical fashion. Most probably, it departs from that reality as soon as it is written down. Abū ‘Abbās al-Yatīm tells the people what he has heard because what he has heard is “true.” This strong relationship between orality and writing, between truth and lying, becomes problematic when a mythical or imaginative act is taken as verity.<sup>28</sup>

*Rihlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* contests our traditional understanding of what stories, truth, lying, and writing mean. As I mentioned earlier,

<sup>27</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 122–7.

<sup>28</sup> A good example of this complicated relationship presents Alice, who never believed Abū ‘Abbās’ story about the nun, going to ‘Ayn al-Mraysi and lighting up candles for the nun; Alice even believed herself “to be walking on water” exactly as the nun did.

when a story is told and written down, it actually diverges or departs from its beginning. This departure, however, forces the reader to look for, and to constitute, the truth. A major characteristic of this novel is that it constantly reminds the readers that what we are reading is a fictional work. In his efforts to collect more stories from Alice, at different instances in the novel, the narrator-author reminds us of the creative act:

“What do you do for a living?” “I write. I work as a writer” “What the hell is writing for, for God’s sake?” “To compose books and create heroes, so people can read them and enjoy them” (138,130). “But what do you want with me?” I want to write about you. “You’re a liar. . . . Nothing you say is true. You’re full of lies. Honestly, what do you want with me? What can I help you with?” “I want you to tell me stories.” “Why should I?” “So I can write.” “Okay. Instead of telling you, why don’t I just write them?” (139,131)

The strength of this novel lies in Alice’s answer: “Instead of telling you . . . [I’ll] write them.” For writing involves the transformation of an event as it happened into a story. The relationship of telling to writing is that of establishing the event in time and place. The significant issue is how the spoken word, that of telling, is transformed and transferred by the act of writing. Writing, as Foucault observes “refers not to a thing but to speech, a work of language only advances more deeply into the intangible density of the mirror, calls forth the double of this already doubled writing, discovers in this way a possible and impossible infinity, ceaselessly strives after speech, maintains it beyond the death which condemns it.”<sup>29</sup> Writing, then, gives a story some kind of specificity in time and place and saves it from oblivion and death.

This relationship between speech, writing, and death is not new. Shahrazad tells stories in order to save her life and to drive away the danger of death.<sup>30</sup> Alice tells the narrator-author the stories so that he can write them down and amuse the readers. But Alice disappeared in 1984. The writer remains, trying to collect the pieces of

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 56.

<sup>30</sup> See Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Women’s Body, Women’s Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991). Malti-Douglas investigates and analyzes the intricate relationship between narration and death. Shahrazad, the mistress of narrators, was able to save her body from destruction by telling stories.

the stories and wondering whether he is someone who kills his characters or a mere narrator who tells their stories. Writing in this context means life, since the narrator uses his writing to save life/memory from death and oblivion. Put differently, although all the characters disappeared or went to “this et cetera and didn’t come back” (7,2), we are still reading their stories.<sup>31</sup> As Marcuse notes, the aesthetic level of any artistic work is in its interconnectedness between form and content, even when the subject matter of that work is death. Marcuse considers that each of the aesthetic form and the independence of the literary work and “truth” is by itself a socio-historical manifestation. But it transcends that phenomenon because the truthfulness of art lies in its overstepping agreed upon truth.<sup>32</sup> All the events or the stories in *Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* revolve around death and writing. We read for example:

If Kamāl al-‘Askārī (the soldier) hadn’t died, then Alice wouldn’t have met up with Ghāndī, and if she hadn’t met Ghāndī, then he wouldn’t have told her his story. And if Ghāndī hadn’t died, Alice wouldn’t have told me the story. And if Alice hadn’t disappeared, or died, then I wouldn’t be writing what I’m writing now (18,14).

As Walter Benjamin notes, death allows the narrator to tell everything. It allows him to mix the real with the imaginary. The narrator has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, his stories go back to the past, to natural history.<sup>33</sup> The narrator-author in *Riḥlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* not only derives his authority from death, but he also draws our attention to the structural strategy of the embedded stories contained in this narrative.

The function of embedded stories, as Todorov notes, is to allow the main story to reach its maximum development so that we can move to another event where a character becomes “a potential story that is the story of his[her] life. Every new character signifies a new plot. We are in the realm of narrative-men[women].”<sup>34</sup> The embedded

<sup>31</sup> There is an interesting play on words in this quotation. “*ilā ākhirihī*” literally means “et cetera, and so forth” in English. It is from the same root (a/kh/r) that “*al-ākhirā*” (the hereafter) is derived. So when we read in the text that “they all died and went to this et cetera and didn’t come back” we can apply the second meaning (hereafter) to this expression.

<sup>32</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 9.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* edited with an intro. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 94.

<sup>34</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984): 70.

stories in *Rihlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* could stand as stories by themselves, and they mainly refer to life, death, birth or destruction. We read the stories of the many names enumerated in the first page of the novel, and we move from one story to another by associations and mentioning of names. Most of the stories in *Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* originate in names, and they revolve around death and writing, as the previous quote indicates. Moreover, we read that Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr is the only shoe-shiner who hangs his shoe-shine box around his neck as if it were a hanging rope. When Ghāndī dies “it [is] as though he’[s] been hanged by the strap of his shoe-shine box” (27,22). Between these two descriptions of Ghāndī’s profession and his death, we learn of al-Tannir’s death and that of al-‘Askarī. Although the motives of the two men’s death differ, the end result is the same, that is death. “The problem [is]n’t with morals, it [is] with the rope” (27,22).

One of the fascinating issues that this novel presents with respect to the embedded stories is the telling of Ghāndī’s birth. We move from the death of Sunbuk, one of the wanderers in Beirut where nobody knows anything about him, from the pain and sadness that prevail in the city, from the Israeli soldiers “who [occupy] the streets and [shoot] at anything and everything” (90,85), to Little Ghāndī’s birth; as though the screams of death are to be associated with those of birth. From the news of Ghāndī’s birth, we proceed to learn about his “journey” and his suffering as a child and as an adult. We also learn about his arranged marriage at his father’s funeral. How are we to explain these inextricably intertwined scenes that permeate existence with their contradictions of birth and death, love and hate, happiness and sorrow. Life with all its contradictions is the sum of these painful and happy moments whose illogical pattern no logic can explain.

The repetition of the scene of Ghāndī’s death at the beginning of chapters (2, 3, 4, 5, 6) is a confirmation that any event might in fact happen “as if the narrator needed reiteration to prove to himself that improbable things actually *did* take place.”<sup>35</sup> Repetition is one of the means through which the narrator proves to himself and to the readers that the death of Ghāndī, the simple shoe-shine man is indeed one of the greatest calamities that hit the city; for Little

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<sup>35</sup> Edward Said, “Foreword,” to Khoury’s *Little Mountain* 10–1.

Ghāndī's death represents in fact the crude senselessness of death. There is another function to the repetition of the same scene at the beginning of the above mentioned chapters. Repetition, which helps the development of the narrative, also facilitates the introduction of increasingly complex variations to the frame story. We move from the death of Ghāndī in the second chapter to the description of dozens of planes flying low over the city and the effect they have on Ghāndī. Ghāndī's fear of the Israelis<sup>36</sup> recreates his fear of the cave where his father imprisoned him as a youngster. In both cases, this association of fear is only one means of "writing by association which advances the event slowly."<sup>37</sup>

The scene of Ghāndī's death in the 5th chapter is followed by other associations with death where everything becomes "black." The newspapers which covered Ghāndī's body dissolved "under the light September rain" till death appeared black like the dissolving paper print. This blackness is associated with "the soldiers' boots, their rifles, their faces, their screams in the streets, and the hissing of bullets as they [tear] out buildings and windows" (89,84). We move from this blackness which covers the city to the description of two people shot by the Israelis. Blackness and death are not only associated with suffering and dissolution but also with "the river of blood" that afflicted the city (91,86).

The mixing of the individual and the collective, the private and the public, is what this novel successfully conveys to the readers. The shift from Ghāndī's death to that of Sunbuk and the injury of al-Munla, to the screams of the whole city, ["suddenly, the abandoned, demolished city began to shout from its minarets in a unified voice" (90,85)] provide us with one of the "mirrors" that this novel tries to convey. Writing in this context engages itself with and interrogates various concerns, whether they are ideological, political, social, historical, or religious. Writing becomes a mirror that does not reflect a single absolute truth or reality. Like the mirror, it approaches reality from many different angles, as the opening verse by Ibn 'Arabī in *Riḥlat Ghāndī al-Ṣaghīr* tells us: "A face is only one except when

<sup>36</sup> "They found him lying on the road with the shoe-shine box next to him. They said he'd gotten scared. He heard the Israelis were arresting everyone, he was afraid of going to jail, he was afraid of going back to the cave they jailed him in a long time ago" (22,18).

<sup>37</sup> Elias Khoury, "Khawāṭir ḥawl al-Kitāba al-Riwā'yya," *Mawāqif* 46 (Spring 1983): 152-5.

it is reflected by many mirrors then it becomes many.” Besides the Sufi interpretation of this verse, there are other levels related to the mirrors of writing, subjectivity, religion, history, naming, and identifying. Writing itself is a journey like the physical or metaphorical journeys traveled by Ghāndī, Alice, the narrator and others. The narrator-author who is “narrating and writing” discovers that he is “digging in a deep well,” for writing as I mentioned elsewhere is a discovery into the known and the unknown.<sup>38</sup> Elias Khoury doesn’t offer any definitive answers for the dilemmas of life, war, and invasion. The novel’s structure with its embedded stories parallels the “Lebanese wars” with their seemingly unresolved events. Although the “journey” is tragic for most of the characters in this novel, the narrator, like Shahrazad, wards off death by his stories. Writing in this context provides life and continuation to the act of creativity in the midst of war and destruction. This kind of writing refuses to be incorporated into rigid and unified conceptions of religion, history, and subjectivity.

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<sup>38</sup> See my “Foreword” to *Gates of the City*.

## LIVING IN TRUTH

MIRIAM COOKE

“Islam is the religion of the state,” Muslims are its enemy. “Culture is humanity’s highest need,” cultural production is dangerous. “Bāsil, the parachutist, the horseman, is a martyr,” the heir apparent to the Syrian throne crashed while speeding. Party slogans and unspoken realities. Such are the contradictions that characterize life in Syria at the end of the twentieth century. To survive, citizens must learn how to balance one statement with another, to believe them both and at the same time, to disbelieve.

The challenge is to “live in truth,”<sup>1</sup> a phrase used by the Czech erstwhile dissident and now President Vaclav Havel. To live in truth means to assume “responsibility to and for the whole.” This sense of responsibility is often articulated through the production of cultural artifacts that confront the *status quo*, and demand change. To live in truth, therefore, entails risk and the readiness to pay the price. When several people live in truth they create the conditions for the emergence “of the independent life of society (where) free thought, alternative values and ‘alternative behavior’” can exist and exert pressure.<sup>2</sup> Within a coercive system, the urge to write and to paint, to be engaged in cultural production, is not merely cathartic, it demonstrates the belief in individuals’ capacity to bring about change. Despite assumptions to the contrary, there are intellectuals within Syria who are doing precisely that.

President Hafiz Asad may be fascinated by the fantasy of democracy that he is fashioning, but the writers and artists who live, *nolens volens*, in Syria are not. They are working for freedom and justice, interrogating history in search of guidance. As the recently deceased playwright Sa’dallāh Wannūs (1941–1997) said, “We create theater because we want intellectual change and development and a deepening

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<sup>1</sup> This is the English title of Vaclav Havel’s collection of essays on dissidence and power in the post-totalitarian state.

<sup>2</sup> Havel, Vaclav, *Living in Truth* (edited by Jan Vladislav). London: Faber & Faber, 1987, 104–105.

of communal consciousness about our historical destiny.”<sup>3</sup> Wannūs believed that in order to understand the present intellectuals must study the past. They must not give in to the regime’s attempts to erase the past, because the urge to deprive “a society of its history is a key means for marginalizing civil society and encouraging the rule of tyranny . . . I consider literary works that try to revive forgotten periods, without losing their artistry, to be glorious artifacts of opposition . . . Only a historical consciousness can extricate us from the vicious circle that blocks the road to the future.”<sup>4</sup> These women and men are producing books, plays, paintings and films that aim to establish a dialogue and to foster communication that will bring together a community of dissent. They are trying to imagine change in a system that has based itself on opposition to change.

Although the Syrian regime is more dictatorial in the classical sense than post-totalitarian, the term Havel uses in “The Power of the Powerless” (1978) to describe the former Soviet-bloc European countries, like them it is

permeated with hypocrisy and lies: government by bureaucracy is called popular government. . . the complete degradation of the individual is presented as his or her ultimate liberation; depriving people of information is called making it available; the use of power to manipulate is called the public control of power, and the arbitrary abuse of power is called observing the legal code; the repression of culture is called its development; the expansion of imperial influence is presented as support for the oppressed; the lack of free expression becomes the highest form of freedom . . . banning independent thought becomes the most scientific of world views; military occupation becomes fraternal assistance. Because the regime is captive to its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. It falsifies statistics. It pretends not to possess an omnipotent and unprincipled police apparatus. It pretends to respect human rights. It pretends to persecute no one. It pretends to fear nothing. It pretends to pretend nothing.

Individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them. For this reason, however, they must *live within a lie*. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it.

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Māhir al-Sharīf, “Sa’dallāh Wannūs and ‘Historical Miniatures’” in *al-Nahj* (Summer 1995): 260.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfill the system, make the system, *are* the system.<sup>5</sup>

It is uncanny how this description of pre-1989 Eastern Europe accords point by point with the conditions in which Syrians now live, down even to the detail of the “military occupation becomes fraternal assistance,” a phrase which encapsulates Syria’s attitude to the neighboring Lebanese to whom slogans everywhere refer as “our brothers.” Havel’s description of the urban landscape draped with party banners paints the panorama of today’s Syrian cities. Like the Czechs before them, Syrians walk through their streets apparently oblivious to the omnipresent pictures of Asad and two of his sons and to the banners boasting the ideology of the Correctionist Movement, the name Asad gave to his regime in 1973. It is as though the messages pressing in on them wherever they go do not get through to them; as though they “do what is done, what is to be done, what must be done, but at the same time—by that very token—they confirm that it must be done in fact. They conform to a particular requirement and in so doing they themselves perpetuate that requirement.”<sup>6</sup>

For Havel, individuals who consent to display a slogan or who tolerate others who do so are both victims and instruments of the system, because “they may create through their involvement a general norm and, thus, bring to bear on their fellow citizens.”<sup>7</sup> The only way to undermine this norm is not to go along with the system, not to stick the President’s face on the car window. Such a refusal, however trivial it may seem, threatens to create a crisis because the one who has said no, the dissident, “has addressed the world. He has enabled everyone to peer behind the curtain. He has shown everyone that it *is* possible to live within the truth.”<sup>8</sup>

Another East European writing about the post-Soviet era also suggests parallels to modern-day Syria. It is the Slovenian Slavoj Žižek. Without using Havel’s expression, Žižek describes the obstacles intellectuals who struggle to live in truth have to overcome. The major hurdle is the regime’s projection of the “fantasy of choice.” It is enabled by “empty symbolic gestures” that produce the fantasy that there is a choice where all know there is none. At the moment of

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<sup>5</sup> Havel, *Living in Truth*, 44–45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

being confronted with such a choice knowing that one “cannot choose not to choose,” the survivor knows how to choose. The only way to undermine such a system in Zizek’s view is to accept as real the empty gesture, in other words that the choice is real, and to function within its logic. Then in that gap between the fantasy of choice and the reality of its absence, the dissident inserts her demands and challenges. These demands and challenges, Zizek warns, should remain modest and not exceed the ideological framework of the dominant system so as not to risk marginalization and irrelevancy. What the dissident must learn to do is to capture the fantasy: even though the actor had believed it to be so disguised that it was invisible, it becomes transparent when resisted. To live in truth, the intellectual must exploit the gaps in fantasy which reveal its immateriality.<sup>9, 10</sup>

This is what playwrights like Wannūs and Mamdūh ‘Adwān (b. 1941) and novelists like the Saudi exile ‘Abd al Raḥmān Munīf (b. 1930s) are doing in Syria today. They are trying to make the regime accountable for its rhetoric. In an interview with Mary Ilyās, Wannūs said that his writing career had taught him that “the national project, in as much as it entails liberty, progress and modernity, does not require that we annul ourselves as individuals with our desires and urgent needs for freedom, as also our ability to say ‘I’ without shame (God save us from the word ‘I’). This national program can only succeed and become a reality when this ‘I’ opens up and practices its freedom and expresses itself without shame, pretense or dread.”<sup>11</sup> If the ruling Ba‘ath Party claims that its constitution is based on liberty, then it must allow for the individual expression that Wannūs advocates.

Writing about Wannūs’ 1993 play, *Munammāt Tārīkhiya*, Munīf exploits the gap in the fantasy projected by another Party slogan:

<sup>9</sup> Zizek, Slavoj, “The obscenity of power.” Lecture at Duke University. 4 September 1996.

<sup>10</sup> “Ideology is a systematically distorted communication: a text in which, under the influence of unavowed social interests (of domination, etc.), a gap separates its ‘official,’ public meaning from its actual intention—that is to say, in which we are dealing with an unreflected tension between the explicit enunciated content of the text and its pragmatic presuppositions.” Zizek, *Mapping Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1994), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Ilyās “Li awwal marra ash‘uru bi l-kitāba ka-ḥurriyya. Li awwal marra ash‘uru anna al-kitāba mut‘a” (For the First Time I Feel the Writing is Freedom. For the First Time I Feel that Writing is Pleasure), in *al-Ṭarīq*, vol. 1/1 (Jan.-Feb., 1996), 104.

“Culture is humanity’s highest need.” This is the first sentence the President Asad wrote in the visitor’s book in 1985 upon the occasion of the opening of the Asad Library in Damascus. This sentence was picked up by the Ministry of Culture as its motto. Now, during all official holidays, the streets around the Ministry in the Abū Rummāneh district of Damascus are festooned with flags and banners carrying that inscription. This is not empty rhetoric. This regime does care deeply about culture.

Reading the slogan literally, Munīf insists that culture must serve “humanity and its happiness. Its function is not merely to explain events, but to implant values, behaviors, traditions and a vision whose goal is to inspire respect for what is true, noble and enlightening in human life and history. It should lead to progress and well-being in all spheres and not only in one sphere at the expense of others.” Quoting Socrates, al-Ḥallāj, Nobel and Oppenheimer, Munīf writes that knowledge is at once intellectual and moral: “There is no neutrality in culture. The intellectual cannot be impartial . . . but must be completely engaged in the present epoch, using culture to interact with and to influence the times. The intellectual must give the present a scent and features that will make it more human or at least less painful and miserable and make it possible to open doors on to the future . . . There must be a coordination and complementarity between words and their meanings . . . If not, *these words will turn into curses and the one who is best versed in this craft will be the most dangerous.*”<sup>12</sup> In exposing the regime’s separation between words and their meanings, Munīf is living in truth. He is preventing the transformation of words into curses. He is confronting the dangerous wordsmiths.

As Havel wrote of his Czech compatriots who dared to live within the truth, “the fact that these people exist and work is in itself immensely important and worthwhile.”<sup>13</sup>

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“Islam is the religion of the state,” yet Muslims are its enemy.

President Hafız Asad is a Muslim because he is the head of a state whose constitution requires that its leader be a Muslim.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf, “Ibn Khaldūn and His Image in *Historical Miniatures*” (“Ibn Khaldūn wa Ṣūratuhu fī *Munammāt Tārikhiyya*” in *Al-Ṭarīq*, vol. 1/1 (Jan.-Feb. 1996), 118, 131; my emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> Havel, *Living in Truth*, 67.

Two nonsensical statements? Or, a key to decoding doublespeak in post-1989 Syria? The key is the Alawite sect. This is the religion of Hafiz Asad. Its adherents are concentrated in the mountains of the north in the Latakia region, where they constitute Syria's largest religious minority. For centuries a fierce debate has raged about whether the Alawites may be considered to be Muslims. The secrecy surrounding the rituals and tenets of their faith has made it difficult to resolve the issue. In 1922, the French described the Alawites as Twelver Shi'ites so as to "distinguish them from the Sunnis . . . (although) the Twelvers saw Alawism as negatively as did Sunnis . . . (the Alawites) used the association with Twelver Shi'ism to argue for a distinct Alawi form of Shi'ism."<sup>14</sup> The Islamic credentials of the Alawite religion are still ambiguous, yet Asad had himself declared the rightful head of a state whose leader must by law be a Muslim. How did he achieve this coup?

In 1973, three years after coming to power, the People's Assembly "adopted a permanent constitution that made no mention of Islam. Sunnis greeted the new texts with riots. To defuse this anger, the government added a clause to the constitution requiring that the head of state be a Muslim."<sup>15</sup> Since Asad was President he had to be a Muslim. Not long afterwards, he reaffirmed the importance of that aspect of the constitution by enlisting the help of the Twelver Shi'i Imam Mūsā al-Ṣadr who was then head of the Higher Shi'i Council in Lebanon. The Imam mysteriously disappeared in 1978, but in July 1973, he issued a *fatwā* that declared the Alawis to be "an authentic part of Shi'i Islam."<sup>16</sup> Asad then began to be seen praying in public, and he "performed the minor pilgrimage to Mecca in February 1974. The government built mosques at a faster clip than ever before and massively distributed Qur'āns carrying the president's picture (the so-called Asad Qur'āns). Court biographers built up Asad's Islamic credentials, for example, letting it be known that he had memorized one-quarter of the Qur'ān by the age of six years."<sup>17</sup> On the seventeenth anniversary of the Correctionist Movement, Asad clarified his intent by professing belief "in God and the

<sup>14</sup> Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria. The History of an Ambition*. (New York: Oxford U.P. 1990), 185.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Seale, *Asad. The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: California U.P. 1989), 352; see 173.

<sup>17</sup> Lucien Bittolim, *Hafez al-Asad*, as quoted in Daniel Pipes, *Greater Syria*, 185.

message of Islam . . . I was, I am and I will remain a Muslim, just as Syria will remain a proud citadel flying high the flag of Islam! But the enemies of Islam who traffic in religion will be swept away!"<sup>18</sup>

Next, Asad cracked down on the enemies of Islam who turned out to be the Sunni Muslim Brothers. They had been unquiet since 1963 when the Ba'th took over power and Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥmān Abū Ghidda founded the Movement of Islamic Liberation.<sup>19</sup> Particularly provoked by their government's intervention on behalf of a Maronite militia in the Lebanese Civil War in 1976, they began to carry out systematic acts of anti-regime violence which "included the murder of eighty-three young Alawi military cadets at an artillery school in Aleppo in June 1979, and three car bomb attacks in Damascus between August and November 1980 that killed several hundred people. In July 1980, membership in the Muslim Brotherhood was made a capital offense punishable by death, with the ratification of Law No. 49."<sup>20</sup>

What is generally known about the Muslim Brothers in Syria is that they were brutally repressed in Hama in 1982. The story has been tidied up into a single event that followed logically out of the Brothers' terrorist activities and eliminated their threat. Insiders praise Asad for succeeding where other leaders have failed. Why otherwise would there be no fundamentalist problem in Syria? The untidy part of the story is what lingers: the large numbers of Brothers, their relatives and their acquaintances languishing in prisons, particularly in the "kingdom of death and madness." The author of the Human Rights Watch/Middle East issue on Tadmor, published in April 1996, takes this phrase from the poet Faraj Beraqdar (Bayraqdār). During his 1993 trial, after five years' detention, Beraqdar describes Tadmor, a military prison in the desert near the tourist center of Palmyra about 130 miles northeast of Damascus, as the "kingdom of death and madness." It was in Tadmor that the first massacre of Muslim Brothers took place. On 27 June 1980, commando forces from "the Defense Brigades and the 138th Security Brigade were helicoptered to the prison and murdered prisoners in their dormitories."<sup>21</sup> 500

<sup>18</sup> Seale, *Asad*, 328.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>20</sup> *Human Rights Watch/Middle East* (HRW/ME) "Syria's Tadmor Prison. Dissent Still Hostage to a Legacy of Terror." 8/2 (E) (April 1996): 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Brothers paid for an assassination attempt against the President the day before, which it was assumed their cohorts had engineered.

The connection between Tadmor and the Brothers is widely known in the country, but it is also absolutely silenced. No one breathes the word "Tadmor." No one thinks the words "Muslim Brothers." To write about Islam or about the President is taboo.

Yet some do write, often using the screen of historical allegory. In 1996, the celebrated poet Mamdūḥ 'Adwān published and also staged his play entitled *al-Ghūl*,<sup>22</sup> about the dictatorial ruler whom the Ottomans sent to Syria during the first world war. The play is either history or historical satire, either way the plot is transparent.

It enacts the trial of Jamāl Pasha, most notorious for his extermination of Armenians. All those whom he has wronged have returned to bear witness and judge the Ghoul. The anonymous victims are part of the Chorus, others come in their own capacity. Jamāl makes light of the trial: "Do you think it will be easy for you to judge tyranny? . . . Tyranny only becomes tyranny once it has taken hold of its age. Hence, a trial of tyranny becomes a trial of the age that submitted to it."<sup>23</sup> The responsible are not those who commit evil, but those who let evil happen.

Jamāl Pasha is at the center of a great drama in the Middle East—reminiscent of the current Peace Process—the Europeans, represented by the Englishman Mark Sykes and the Frenchman Georges Picot, carve out spheres of influence and deal with the Jewish problem. To gain credibility among the Syrians, the Turkish Jamāl Pasha is advised that he improve his Muslim image. When Jamāl protests that upon his arrival he did go to the mosque to pray, the "Person," who is the keeper of the book of testimonies against him, responds: "That's just the problem, Pasha. That was the only time you did pray." In annoyance, Jamāl mutters that he will pray but that he is too busy just now. The Chorus responds: "Do not be surprised at what he says. You may know that the Ottomans, who for four hundred years ruled us in the name of Islam, not once made the

<sup>22</sup> Several writers have chosen to title plays and stories *The Ghūl*, cf. Ibrāhīm Ṣamū'īl's short story about an abusive father in this 1990 collection *Al-Nahmahāt* (Damascus: Dar al-Jundī), and Ghassān al-Jaba'il's story about a vicious jailer that the Ministry of Culture would not allow to be published in his 1994 collection, *Aṣābī' al-Mawz* (Damascus: Manshūrāt Wizārat al-Thaqāfa).

<sup>23</sup> Mamdūḥ 'Adwān, *Al-Ghūl: Jamāl Pāshā al-Saffāh*. (The Ghoul: Jamāl Pasha, "The Butcher"). (Damascus: Union of Arab Writers Publications, 1996), 30.

Pilgrimage (to Mecca).”<sup>24</sup> (61) Jamāl realizes that to rule effectively he must appear as observant as possible. In an almost slapstick scene with the envoy from Sherif Ḥusayn, Jamāl frantically adds the encomium “May God’s prayers and blessings be upon him” to every mention of the name of the Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>25</sup>

Toward the end of the play, noticing that Sherif Ḥusayn’s authority derives from the fact that he can trace his ancestry back to the Prophet, Jamāl determines that he, too, will have such a lineage. To overcome the problem that there were no Turks connected with the early Islamic empire, Jamāl turns to the mufti As‘ad al-Shuqayrī. He tells him of a vision:

Jamāl: I saw, O God pray on the Prophet, a horseman with a green turban and a green waistcoat riding a green mare. Might this possibly be our Lord Khiḍr?

As‘ad: Knowledge is with God.

Jamāl: He stood in front of me just as you are standing right now and he said: “Don’t you recognize me?” I froze, not knowing how to reply. So he added: “You don’t know me because you do not know yourself. Reveal your lineage. Do not leave the jewels hidden.” Then he pulled at the horse’s rein and left me in my confusion. My lord, how do you interpret all this?

As‘ad: Knowledge is with God, Pasha.

Clearly, the mufti is an unwilling accomplice and so the Pasha coaxes him along, suggesting that Lord Khiḍr, the great Sufi guide of Moses, was telling him that the two of them were linked. Each statement elicits from the dumbfounded mufti a “God knows,” and then finally: “What do you want?” The Pasha, it seems, wants “a Turkish wife or a slavegirl who had been with God’s Prophet . . . because she was my mother, Shaykh. My mother. Do you understand now?” Yes, the mufti understands. So Jamāl wants to know who she was. As their conversation progresses, As‘ad seems to give a little:

As‘ad: I am not sure if the Prophet had a Turkish wife, and even if there had been a Turkish woman I am not convinced that she ever became pregnant.

Nothing daunted, Jamāl gives him his orders:

Jamāl: Make her pregnant, Shaykh. Make her pregnant!

As‘ad: (nervously) Me, Pasha?

Jamāl: You. Someone else. It doesn’t matter.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 139–141.

Finally, he tells the mufti to go to the history books, where all things may be found. He should dig up the lineage chart, the closer to the Prophet the better. When the mufti turns to the Chorus to ask them what to do, they tell him to “make her pregnant.” For if he does not, another certainly will.<sup>26</sup>

The play ends as it began with the Chorus. The opening chant is: “You shall not escape us even while you sleep. Your victims’ vengeance will pursue you for blood . . . even if you muzzle their complaints they will haunt you even if they become ghosts.”<sup>27</sup> The final chant worries about whether the elimination of the tyrant will end the tyranny: “Who will abort him out of the womb of the future?”

The greatest danger  
 From this tyrant  
 Is that he will recur  
 Wisdom at all times  
 Is to destroy the jail  
 Not to cut off the hand of the jailer  
 We have completed our little duty  
 From now on we shall begin  
 Our great duty:  
 This tyranny  
 Shall never recur  
 Shall never recur.<sup>28</sup>

The play was acted night after night to a packed house at the popular Ḥamra Theater during the spring of 1996, and the audience was enraptured at the daring of the language and the political allusions. Everyone involved declared disingenuously that *The Ghūl* was an excellent portrayal of Jamāl Pasha, raising eyebrows at the suggestion that there might be another, more contemporary referent.<sup>29</sup> All that mattered was that they had been able to breathe well if briefly as they felt themselves linked to each other in a community of dissidence. For that moment it did not matter that to breathe well, or *tanaffus*, the word that I heard again and again after a cultural display of daring, risked suffocation later.

The reality is that Mamdūḥ ‘Adwān, the Alawite whom the regime

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 224–231.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 8–10.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 333–34.

<sup>29</sup> Several interviews conducted in Damascus during May, June and July of 1996 left little doubt that there were other referents.

is said to favor, dared to expose the gaps in some fantasies. This is the promise of theater which empowers spectators to think the unthinkable. It opens up dialogue beyond the confines of the building. Again, the parallels with early eighties Czechoslovakia are remarkable. Havel, who is himself a playwright, wrote that theaters were “crammed full of people grateful for every nuance of meaning, frantically applauding every knowing smile from the stage.” ‘Adwān clearly shares Havel’s conviction that theater is the place where “the graveyard intentions of the powers that be (meet with) this irrepressible cultural hunger of the community’s living organism, or perhaps that part of it which has not surrendered to total apathy.”<sup>30</sup>

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Hope for change is vested in the intellectuals who speak the unspeakable, and whose echo carries outside the country. Using historical allegory, opaque symbolism and evasive allusions, the determined seek to escape surveillance so as to draw attention to oppression and injustice.<sup>31</sup> Since words outlive actions, since they can become curses as Munif wrote, intellectuals must choose carefully. Few writers have explored the tension between discourse and activism more deeply than Sa‘dallāh Wannūs. In 1993, he published in the newspaper *Al-Safir* his *Historical Miniatures*, another play ostensibly about history. Or, historical satire?

The play concerns the encounter in 1400 between Tamerlane (d. 1405), the bloodthirsty founder of the Timurid Dynasty from Samarqand, and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), the judge, historian and proto-sociologist from Tunis. In this play, Wannūs’ focus is highly elitist. Less interested in providing guidance for individual action, he is examining the ways creative artists and cultural producers have chosen to interact with their regime.

Before the play begins Tamerlane has ravaged his way across Asia and is advancing on Damascus. In the home of Shaykh Burhān al-Dīn al-Tadhīlī, the chief qadi of Damascus, Ibn Khaldūn awaits the arrival of Sultan al-Nāṣir Faraj ibn Barqūq, the Mamluk ruler who has come from Egypt to protect the Syrian capital from devastation at the hands of the Tatar. During a meeting of religious

<sup>30</sup> Havel, *Living in Truth*, 125.

<sup>31</sup> The careful reader may be able to decode the references to the Muslim Brothers by remaining alert to clues like “God is great” popping up in the middle of a text.

authorities in the Umayyad Mosque, where the leaders deliberate whether to confront the tyrant or appease him, harsh words are exchanged about the right course of action. The final decision is to issue a *fatwā* “calling for a *jihād* against the accursed Tamerlane, the enemy of God.”<sup>32</sup> They can afford to do so because the Mamluk army from Egypt is so vast that its presence in Damascus has finally stopped Tamerlane’s merciless advance.<sup>33</sup>

The merchant Dulama is distraught at what the clerics have decided, since *jihād* is bad for business. In a curious theatrical move that he then employs throughout the rest of the play, Wannūs changes the merchant’s speech from first to third person. From this objective perspective the audience sees the other side of a situation. Spectators can imagine the alternative action, or criticize the chosen behavior. In this case, we hear from Dulama, but at a slight remove, about the treasure he has hoarded and his son’s disapproval. He is complacent about the ability of a good bargain to solve any problem however grave. At the end of the play, we see him hanging upside down above a fire as the Tatars question him about the whereabouts of his stash. His son pleads with his father to tell them, but he would rather die and sacrifice his son and household than tell.

Dulama’s attitude may be more crass than that of other characters, but most believe like him in the effectiveness of their particular obsessions and strategies. The qadi, his daughter and several minor characters are committed activists who are convinced that open confrontation is the only way. They fight and die. Ibn Khaldūn’s obsession is his theory of the rise and fall of civilizations, a cycle that begins with the group feeling and energy of desert tribes and ends in the decadence of urban culture. Tamerlane and his Tatar hordes clearly represent the first, and fin-de-siècle Damascene culture the latter. The enactment of the theory is too powerful to be withstood, and he allows it to dictate the choices he makes. He lives.

He is as dismayed as the merchant by the *fatwā* calling for *jihād*, exclaiming: “the hue of religion has changed and the solidarity and group feeling of the Arabs have gone, hence *jihād* is no longer possible. No. No. Today *jihād* will only produce a man tilting at windmills or wanting to deceive the world . . . those who consider themselves

<sup>32</sup> Sa’dallāh Wannūs, *Historical Miniatures* (Munamnamāt Tārīkhiyya) (Damascus: Al-Ahālī, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Munīf, “Ibn Khaldūn wa Ṣūratuhu fi *Munamnamāt Tārīkhiyya*,” 123.

to be upholders of the truth and defenders against raiders and yet have no idea what kind of solidarity they need” such folk are either crazy or liars.<sup>34</sup> This is a time of decline and therefore effective action to prevent an inevitable process is impossible. In this civilizational sunset, the only possible glimmer of light is to be gained from describing and bearing witness to the sunset.

Ibn Khaldūn directs these words at his student Sharaf al-Dīn, who has accompanied his master on this fateful trip. His job is to take dictation, and he is eager to learn the art of the great man, but with the progress of the plot he grows increasingly skeptical, even contemptuous, of the compromises claimed to be necessary. Ibn Khaldūn insists that knowledge must be separated from action because it is more lasting. Herein lies the message of the play: since the written word outlasts action, it must be fully engaged for it is forever subject to scrutiny. After half a millennium of respect, Ibn Khaldūn is finally being brought to task for his political opportunism. Readers and audience alike are led to reflect on what the outcome might have been had Ibn Khaldūn chosen to intervene, had he determined to live in truth despite the price he might have had to pay for doing so.

Sharaf al-Dīn is caught between Ibn Khaldūn’s pragmatism and al-Tadhīlī’s idealism. He vacillates between the two. He pleads with his teacher, telling him that the Damascenes are ready to fight and that all they need is a word from him. Ibn Khaldūn is not to be cajoled into action. Defiantly, Sharaf al-Dīn announces: “We shall resist steadfastly until something in this nation changes. Something must change. If not, we shall have lost our right to exist.”<sup>35</sup> They may have gained their right to exist but at the expense of their existences!

Ironically, the rebellious student ends up with Ibn Khaldūn: they are among the very few that Tamerlane allows to live. The Tatar does not love Ibn Khaldūn, he needs him. During their meeting, he had commissioned the North African scholar to write him a history of the Maghreb that is so vivid and detailed that Tamerlane will be able to visualize it as though he were seeing it with his own eyes.<sup>36</sup> Although it is obvious why Tamerlane should want such a history, Ibn Khaldūn agrees easily.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Wannūs, *Munamnamāt Tārīkhiyya*, 1/2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 3/5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 2/8.

<sup>37</sup> Munīf gives a historical background to Ibn Khaldūn’s shocking act of betrayal. Sultan Abū ‘Inān had imprisoned Ibn Khaldūn with the others for conspiracy

Ibn Khaldūn is obsessed with the need to record objectively, since passion and excitement corrupt insight. He does not believe that scholars should meddle in politics, but only record and analyze events, revealing how and why they happened. After Sultan Barqūq flees with the pretext that in his absence his throne is in danger, leaders realize that they do not have the strength for outright battle. City elders go to negotiate a truce, bringing lavish gifts. They fail and finally Ibn Khaldūn is enlisted. He is intrigued by Tamerlane because he is so much greater than the ordinary men he has had to serve (2/6); they were “not worthy of being Tamerlane’s shoes.” (2/8) He returns with the recommendation that the city elders submit without a fight. Predictably, the citadel and its occupants are destroyed.<sup>38</sup>

When performed in 1990s Damascus, this play caused quite some controversy. From a historical perspective, people were concerned about the negative portrayal of a Muslim hero. Ibn Khaldūn’s greatness as a social historian and as the author of the famed *Prolegomenon* is clearly tarnished by the exposition of his political opportunism. From a contemporary perspective, everyone knew that Wannūs was questioning the role that intellectuals had chosen to play in Syria. Unlike others who have written historical plays and novels, Wannūs did not categorically deny the transparency of the historical allegory. History, he told Māhir al-Sharīf “was not at all my preoccupation.”<sup>39</sup> This, despite the fact that acting throughout as chorus is the Ancient Historian who comments on Tamerlane’s advance and the state of the River Barada.<sup>40</sup> Wannūs claimed that he had “wanted to indicate

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against him. He had refused clemency until Ibn Khaldūn wrote him a 200-verse panegyric (Munīf, “Ibn Khaldūn,” 120). His writing gave him his freedom.

<sup>38</sup> Of this meeting, which Ibn Khaldūn records in his autobiography entitled *Tārīf* Mohamed Talbi writes, “Il n’est pas impossible qu’il a cru voir en lui l’homme du siècle disposant d’une *asabiyya* suffisante pour reunifier le monde musulman et imprimer un nouveau cours à l’histoire (*Tārīf*, 372, 378). Finalement, après avoir rédigé pour Tamerlan une description du Magrib et avoir assisté aux horreurs de l’incendie et du pillage de Damas, il rejoignit Le Caire . . . et, malgré son attitude compromettante vis-à-vis du chef mongol (*Tārīf*, 378), il fut bien reçu a la cour.” (Talbi, *Ibn Khaldūn et l’Histoire* (Maison Tunisienne de l’Edition, 1973), 14.

<sup>39</sup> al-Sharīf, “Sa’dallāh Wannūs and Historical Miniatures,” 264.

<sup>40</sup> Al-‘Ālim (“A Reading of *Historical Miniatures* and the Image of Ibn Khaldūn”) interprets the references to the Barada as symbolizing the immortality of Damascus. The rise and fall of the river harmonize with the feelings of the exploited people who represent “the silent consciousness of tragedy befalling Damascus, and their rejection of its fall.” The river represents the hope that life will continue beyond the trials of the present. What, I wonder, does it mean that the Barada is today a mere trickle working its way through mounds of garbage in downtown Damascus?

that however horrible the defeat and the massacre, they will not stop the flow of history. Hence, hope is possible despite everything.”<sup>41</sup>

Wannūs may not have wanted to demonize Ibn Khaldūn, preferring “to show Ibn Khaldūn’s situation with all his pretexts and motivations (but) after reading Ibn Khaldūn’s accounts of his meetings, I cannot deny that I felt disapproval and distaste.”<sup>42</sup> Nor was this scholar part of a trend that dragged him into its mindset. Wannūs claimed that intellectuals had long known that “their knowledge entailed a responsibility, and that they were supposed to intervene in public affairs, to oppose aggressors as well as tyrannical rulers. Therefore I was not demanding of Ibn Khaldūn what might appear strange in his time.”<sup>43</sup> He was demanding of the historian what he demanded of himself and his colleagues. He knew that he should act even though he could not “come to a satisfactory accommodation between practice and writing. Today, things are increasingly difficult, because those who believe in writing (for its own sake) hold sway in the cultural sphere. They are mainly known for their contempt for mixing activism, creativity and history.”<sup>44</sup>

The goal is to practice what such people despise. Intellectuals clearly retain a social role since they are everywhere under attack. But in this “stumbling, gloomy age” darkened by the dark clouds of contemporary politics, it is hard to know how to proceed. Laying aside the kind of doubts that plague the *Historical Miniatures*, Wannūs declares that the future depends on organic intellectuals. Borrowing from Gramsci, he characterizes organic intellectuals as those who have retained their historic awareness and have announced their determination to remain “connected to reality and the radical problems that plague the Arab world.”<sup>45</sup>

This is what Ibn Khaldūn chose not to do. He deliberately separated himself from his time, refusing to submit to the mood of the moment. He did not call Tamerlane an infidel but rather the “Commander of the lands of the Byzantines,” for history, he told his student, “is oblivious to curses and current moral vocabulary.”<sup>46</sup> Shamelessly, he dictated to Sharaf al-Dīn the details of his historic

<sup>41</sup> Wannūs, *Munamnamāt*, 265.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 268–69.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>46</sup> Mohamed Talbi, *Ibn Ḥaldūn et l’Histoire*, 2/8.

encounter, repeating the terms of flattery he had employed, and recording his willingness to write the history of North Africa that would provide Tamerlane with a map for his ambitions.<sup>47</sup>

Another sign of Ibn Khaldūn's disconnection from his time is his ability to cut off all human feeling. He apparently feels nothing when his host and friend al-Tadhīlī dies, not even bothering to pay the widow and daughter his condolences. They, however, forgive him, saying kindly that "a learned man like Ibn Khaldūn is always to be excused." (2/1) Not only they but also those whom he betrays and even history itself has forgiven him, and proven him right when he said to Sharaf al-Dīn: "History will remember only the knowledge I have produced and the book I have written." (2/8)

How are we today 600 years later to deal with the fact that this is true? That those who sacrificed themselves while fighting the tyrant have been forgotten and that the one who betrayed the helpless people by providing the tyrant with the wherewithal for future victories survives as a hero? How can one balance commitment with survival?

Wannūs suggests that the intellectual must make the leap of faith that involves action without the dread that it will destroy her. He is inviting us to imagine how history might have been had the great historian decided to live in truth.

Wannūs concluded his interview with al-Sharīf, by stressing that "the times are indeed dark. More than at any other time probably we are in need of enlightened intellectuals who do not shirk their responsibilities and who fully confront this darkness and its brutalizing force."<sup>48</sup> If this play does not provide a model for action, its writing does. Wannūs assumed the responsibility that Ibn Khaldūn shirked by writing works of extreme daring. He did so despite, or maybe because, of his growing political pessimism.

Speaking later with Mary Ilyās, he reflected on how he himself had changed during past decades. While writing his earlier plays in

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<sup>47</sup> Munīf adds to Wannūs' version of the meeting details from Ibn Khaldūn's own account in *al-Ta'rif*. He describes the gifts he brought for Tamerlane: a beautiful Qur'ān, a rug, a copy of the poem "Al-Burda", four boxes of sweets from Egypt. He adds that when he was about to leave Tamerlane, the ruler asked if he could buy his donkey. Ibn Khaldūn knew that he had to give it, but was gratified later to receive the money. Munīf's commentary on Ibn Khaldūn's death was that this marked the end of the "life of one of the greatest, most confused, most ambitious, most wicked adventurers in Arab history." (Munīf, "Ibn Khaldūn," *al-Ṭarīq*, 125–126).

<sup>48</sup> al-Sharīf, "Sa'dallāh," *al-Nahj*, 274–76.

the sixties and seventies he had assumed “that theater symbolized the birth of dialogue in society,” a dialogue which might continue because there was a debate at its heart which extended the margins of democracy. He had hoped to “be able to do something about the oppressive instrument of power by implicating it in dialogue.” This is what happened when *An Evening’s Entertainment for the Fifth of June* (1968), the play about the 1967 war, was produced and halfway through “it branched out into live dialogues between the spectators and the actors.” (101) The audience thought the actors, planted among them and who had started to shout out that the official story was not true, were spectators. They then joined in the fray. The production was stopped on the first night. But it had shown him the power of drama.

In the second stage, however, the regime marginalized the forces of civil society so that it became “too weak to form an opposition with creative and effective methods of struggle . . . After the Gulf War (1991) we reached the stage of absolute nakedness.” (99) Wannūs could no longer believe that if the regime were changed, society would progress. “Cleansed” of his delusions, he ironically gained a sense of freedom, if less optimism. Theater, more than the other creative arts, may be able to “launch a civil dialogue,” yet it is hard to sustain in the absence of civil society. During the last years of his life, Wannūs moved away from popular theater, preferring plays that are written to be read. The absence of an imagined audience “has given me more freedom. I have taken from the novel the art of introspective writing.”<sup>49</sup>

A year before he died, he told Ilyās that he regretted not having paid sufficient attention to the connection between the structural problems in the Arab nation and “the kind of regimes that history has granted us . . . In the past we were naive in our understanding of community and communal work. We used to imagine that this community was made up of individuals with the same faces and moods and we were appalled by exceptionality and individuality. We forgot or did not know that exceptionality and individuality are the two factors that make of a community a human force and not just an assembly of numbers and empty existences.”<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Ilyās, “Li Awwal Marra,” *al-Jarīq*, 100.

<sup>50</sup> Ilyās, *Ibid.*, 102–103.

Wannūs devoted his life to raising the people's consciousness about their situation. Benefiting perhaps from a measure of immunity granted by his Alawite identity, he did not stint in his criticism of a system that he believed was stifling debate and imagination. He wrote despite the danger for himself. But in some ways the greatest danger of all was that the regime was absorbing his dissident voice. For the last three years of his life, Wannūs had to accept government help in order to finance prohibitively expensive cancer treatment. The regime's adoption of this organic intellectual cast a pall on what he wrote. Was he not in their pay? What did it mean for a government employee to criticize the government that someone not in its pay could not criticize? As Havel writes about Eastern European intellectuals in the pre-1989 phase, there is a danger that the regime will try to "come to terms with those who live within the truth by persistently ascribing utilitarian motivations to them—a lust for power or fame or wealth—and thus they try, at least, to implicate them in their own world, the world of general demoralization."<sup>51</sup>

Wannūs surely did not lust for power or fame or wealth, but he would have died sooner and not been able to write his final, highly critical plays without government support. Yet Wannūs was not a court jester, the term Syrians use for intellectuals whose criticism the government commissions. 70,000 people do not attend the funeral of a fool! He was trying to make a difference, to live in truth. And for this attempt, he daily risked his ability to do so.

We on the outside must remain attentive, we must publicize that risk with the hope that it may thus be attenuated. Žižek has described the importance of the "third element," or the attentive outside, in breaking the two-way relationship between "the actor and the one acted upon," between totalitarian regimes and their people. We must side with those who demand justice and accountability for rhetoric, in other words the so-called dissidents. To be able to escape the cycle of co-optation and repression, to be able to challenge the "obscenity of power," dissidents must know what they can only know from the outside, that the "international intelligentsia" is paying attention.<sup>52</sup>

Under current circumstances, change cannot happen in Syria without the third element. It is not enough for Mamdūh 'Adwān to write *al-Ghūl*. The third element must be attentive to the ways in which

<sup>51</sup> Havel, *Living in Truth*, 62.

<sup>52</sup> Žižek, "The Obscenity of Power."

this Ottoman bully governor assigned to Syria during the early decades of this century projects a familiar profile. Nor is it enough for 'Abd al-Raḥmān Munīf to call for an ethically responsible culture. It is not even enough for Sa'dallāh Wannūs to struggle with the role of the intellectual in a system that seeks to co-opt all voices that call for change and accountability for rhetoric.

It is the third element which must take these productions out of their controlled environment and give them global circulation, exposing the "obscenity of power," which commissions criticism, both political and social, and at the same time contains it. Commissioned criticism is dangerous because it allows for the pretense of openness, the fantasy of democracy. Commissioned criticism maintains *status quo* without violence because it kills the souls of those who could have said No!

## MODERN ARABIC POETRY: VISION AND REALITY

BASSAM K. FRANGIEH

I shall carry my soul in the palm of my hand  
And throw it into the cavern of death!  
A life must bring joy to the hearts of friends  
And a death brings fear to the hearts of foes!  
The spirit of a man has two aims:  
To achieve victory, or to die fighting.

These are the verses of the Palestinian 'Abd al-Raḥīm Maḥmūd (1913–1948), the first Arab poet-martyr in modern times, who carried his soul in the palm of his hand, and threw himself into the cavern of death. His premature death at age 35, fighting a battle in an attempt to keep Palestine free from foreign occupation, brought dignity to the hearts of his people. Through his death he eliminated the gap between words and action. 'Abd al-Raḥīm Maḥmūd was a courageous poet and a man of purpose who changed his vision into reality and the reality of his life into a myth—and he shall remain a symbol of heroism and pride for his people.

For the poet to be defender of his people, or even to die for them, as in the case of 'Abd al-Raḥīm Maḥmūd, is not new to Arab society. The Arab poet has at no time in history been entirely free from political and social commitment. Since pre-Islamic times, the Arab poet has played a critical role in his society: as the voice of his tribe, its defender and representative—above all, its provocative force. The ideal Arab hero has always been embodied in the warrior poet who fought against injustice and oppression. In modern times, the role of the Arab poet has not changed a great deal. The poets Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm (d. 1932), Jamīl Ṣidqī al-Zahāwī (d. 1936), Ma'rūf al-Ruṣāfi (d. 1945), Ibrāhīm Ṭūqān (d. 1941) and Muḥammad Maḥdī al-Jawāhiri (b. 1900), to name only a few, fought for social and political justice, reaffirming the continuing involvement of Arab poets in their societies. Maḥmūd Darwīsh, serving as a representative and spokesperson for Palestinians, is one fine example of the importance of the Arab poet in contemporary Arab society.

Also, nowhere in the modern world are poets more actively involved

in the social, political and national realities of their societies than in the Arab world. Arab poets are considered persons of vision and prophecy, and for this they have been a source of fear for many Arab leaders. In the latter part of the twentieth century, as challenges and crises intensified, the poet became even more involved and his role became increasingly critical. Today, the Arab poet has become a "fighter against his time," to use Nietzsche's words. In the last few decades, most prominent Arab poets have been imprisoned, tortured, and forced into exile, or have lived outside the borders of their homelands. As a consequence of their brave words, Qāsim Ḥaddād (b. 1948), Muḥammad 'Afīfī Maṭar (b. 1935) and Abdellatif La'bi (b. 1942) were tortured and imprisoned. Kamāl Nāṣir (d. 1973) was assassinated, 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayyātī (b. 1926) lives in continuous exile, and Muḥaffar al-Nuwwāb (b. 1934) lives underground, while Adonis (b. 1930) resides in France and Nizār Qabbānī lived in England until his death in 1998.

The Arab world in the period following World War II suffered a series of tragic events and confronted increasingly harsh realities in the political, social, national and cultural spheres. Arabs were faced with complicated international conspiracies and foreign interventions, harsh economic conditions, and internal and external threats. By far the most devastating blow to the Arabs came in 1948 with the creation of the state of Israel and the transformation of the Palestinians into a stateless people. The newly independent Arab states became corrupted and most were ruled by military dictators or monarchies supported by foreign powers. Palestine became a helpless nation of refugees, its citizens deprived not only of their land but also of their dignity.

The Arab defeat in 1948 brought a loss of faith, despair, disbelief, and demoralization, which deeply affected the collective Arab psyche. This same catastrophe, however, became "a turning point for modern Arabic literature on a pan-Arab scale"<sup>1</sup> with poets reacting in unison to a new reality where literature should participate in the battle for change. Arab poets confronted these tragic events with a new attitude of defiance and challenge against this humiliating reality. In light of these dramatic occurrences, the School of Romanticism, which had

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<sup>1</sup> Salma Jayussi, *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 16.

dominated the Arab world's literary circles between the two world wars, became totally inappropriate.

Albert Hourani once noted that in order for poetry to reflect the dramatic and rapid developments occurring in the Arab world after World War II, a revolutionary change had to take place in the conception of Arabic poetry, and in the role and the function of the Arab poet. Indeed, there was a change in the "intent and content of the poem". Individual poets may have differed in their emphasis on various aspects of reality, but all were concerned with the theme of the Arab nation and its weaknesses and expressed the "discontent of the Arabs with themselves and the world." What is more, they felt that poetry should play an active role in rebuilding and revitalizing Arab society and bringing about revolutionary change. A new Arab nation and a new Arab man, Hourani wrote, "needed to be brought into being" and the poet should be "creator of a new world."<sup>2</sup>

Poetry needed a new language for this new world, and a new language was created. New symbols and images were drawn from ancient Arab culture, classical mythology, and modern European poetry. All were given a local resonance. The rigid constraints of classical poetic forms, traditional rhyme schemes, and the conventional metric patterns, which had prevailed for more than fifteen centuries, were rejected in favor of free verse poetry with no restrictions. This new free verse movement, which began in the late 1940s and blossomed into fruition in the 1950s, was a poetic revolution in both content and form and a reaction to, and reflection of, the new social and political realities. It serves as an excellent demonstration of the close connection between literature and society in the Arab world.

Soon, there was no major poet who did not use his or her voice as a weapon for political and social change, and *iltizām* (commitment) became for many years "a key term in the Arab critic's vocabulary."<sup>3</sup> The word was a translation of Sartre's engagement, a term coined by the French philosopher in 1948, and popularized by the influential Lebanese periodical *al-Ādāb*, founded by Suhayl Idrīs and devoted to emphasizing the need for literature to have a message.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Hourani, *History of the Arab Peoples* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 396–397.

<sup>3</sup> M.M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 58.

This pan-Arab publication, established in 1953, played an important role in shaping the course of modern Arabic literature. Another leading and influential literary periodical was *Shiʿr*, which played the most important role in the development of modern Arabic poetry. The poets of *Shiʿr*, which was founded in Beirut in 1957 by Yūsuf al-Khāl and Adonis, were extremist and revolutionary in their rejection of stagnation and traditional values, and in their use of the language. The content and form of their poetry had metaphysical and mystical dimensions and was influenced by contemporary Western poetry, especially the French symbolist and surrealist trends.

Meanwhile, on the political front, several new movements emerged seeking to recover the dignity of the Arabs, and to achieve independence, freedom and unity within the Arab world. Pan-Arabism, with its rallying cry for Arab unity and demands for a strong moral relationship between the people and their rulers, resonated in the hearts of Arab poets and the Arab masses at large. The Baʿth party's platform of pan-Arabism and socialism attracted the support of large communities outside of the Muslim Sunni majority, including the Druze, Christians and Alawis. Founded in Syria, it spread to Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and other surrounding areas. Among those challenging the Baʿthists for political and social power were the Marxists, Communists, and members of the Syrian Nationalist Party. The latter, founded in Lebanon by Antoun Saʿādah, was supported by many intellectuals and attracted a handful of prominent poets. Another response to the hardships facing the Arabs took the form of the Islamic movement, which also emerged as a major political force at this time, particularly in Egypt and Syria.<sup>4</sup>

But not until 1952 did the vision for the rebirth and renewal of Arab society really take hold. At a time when the entire Arab world was groping for a way out of its misery, Nasser, the new President of Egypt, emerged as the promise of salvation. The father of Arab nationalism and an advocate of secularization and modernization, he called on Arab nations to transcend narrow factionalism and party alliances, and unite as one. Nasser soon became the unquestioned leader of the Arab world, capturing the hearts and souls of the Arab peoples, who saw him as a savior who would return the Arabs to their long-lost glory. Nasser's confidence and popularity increased

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<sup>4</sup> See Hourani, *History of the Arab Peoples*, 401 and following for details.

with his victory during the Suez crisis in 1956, the building of the High Dam, and the unity with Syria in 1958. He enacted broad measures of social reform and promised strong leadership in defense of the Palestinian cause. Regardless of their ideological orientation, most leading Arab poets dedicated poems to Nasser and hailed him as a hero and the leader of a New Arab World.

Nevertheless, the sudden and unexpected defeat in 1967 shattered the hopes and dreams for Arab unity and the restoration of Arab glory. The promises of Nasser and other leaders and political parties were suddenly broken and everything which had been proclaimed to be true was found to be no more than false illusions, empty words, lies, and deceptions. What followed in the Arab world was a psychological state of profound depression, and in the words of Jabra I. Jabra, "complete spiritual impotence." Arab poets expressed feelings of intense anger, resentment and alienation in their writing, and their verses echoed the bitterness of the Arab reality with voices of discontent and total disillusionment.

The Lebanese poet Khalil Ḥāwī, a fervent champion of Arab nationalism, whose poetry is dominated by the idea of the resurrection of Arab civilization, fell into despair after the break-up of the union between Syria and Egypt in 1961. In his prophetic and tragic poem "Lazarus", 1962, he predicted the disaster of the June 1967 War. The poem is based on the myth of Lazarus, who was resurrected by Christ three days after his death. In Ḥāwī's poem, however, Lazarus, who symbolizes Arab civilization, does not want to be resurrected. Ḥāwī's Lazarus is in love with his death and, instead of accepting his resurrection, he asks the grave digger to deepen his grave:

Deepen the hole, grave digger,  
 Deepen it to an unfathomable depth  
 That extends beyond the orbit of the sun  
 Into a night of ashes,  
 Ruins of a star  
 Buried in the beyond.

Ḥāwī's Lazarus feels that all of his values have died and his life has become more painful than death. Why be resurrected to live such a life? He views his resurrection by Jesus as an act of accursed mercy:

Why would the God of love  
 Resurrect a corpse

Petrified by the lust for death?  
 This mercy is accursed—  
 More painful than spring fever.

Once resurrected, Lazarus remains a lifeless soul and a dead face. His wife, who symbolizes the lust of Arab civilization for life, had long been awaiting her husband's resurrection. But her burning desire to be united with him is crushed by the tragedy of his return. She sees her husband, a cold body and a dead spirit, and is shocked and devastated. She says:

He was a black shadow  
 Looming over the mirror of my breast  
 And in my eyes the shame of a woman  
 Undressed to a stranger.  
 Oh! Why did he return from his grave  
 A dead man?

In his introduction to the poem, Ḥāwī addresses Lazarus: “[your wife] longed for an existential renewal that would satiate the body and the soul, but you failed her, you, her rancorous dead husband!” Indeed, as a consequence of Lazarus' dark resurrection, his wife loses faith in her husband, and in the God who resurrected him. She challenges Jesus:

Of what use are my tears and prayers  
 To a phantom God,  
 To a ghost hiding in blue clouds,  
 In soft light,  
 Where my sighs, laden with hunger  
 Go unheard.

The poem opens at Lazarus' grave and ends in his wife's grave, for Lazarus drags her with him to the world of the dead, into a dark and barren existence. She is too weak to resist, so she loses her lust for life and follows him into the ditch. In this nihilistic vision, Ḥāwī is suggesting that the Arab nation, like Lazarus, is too broken to embrace efforts at its resurrection, and like his wife, too weak to resist being dragged into the grave. Ḥāwī's tragic vision was “realized and his prophetic poem had indeed anticipated and embodied the collapse of the Arabs.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Kamal Abu Deeb, “Conflicts, Oppositions and Negations: Modern Arabic Poetry and the Fragmentation of Self and of Text” (Unpublished manuscript,

The poetry of the Iraqi ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayyātī is also possessed with resurrection and revival of Arab civilization. But while Ḥāwī had a very pessimistic vision of the future, al-Bayyātī generally ends his poems on a note of hope for the future and confidence in the ultimate victory and positive change. Nonetheless, in his collection *Death in Life*, written after the 1967 defeat, he depicts the Arabs in a state of “refrigerated deathlessness”, to use Frye’s phrase, and expresses a great despair born from the reality that the Arabs are suffering from the death of their civilization. His poem “Elegy to ‘Ā’isha”, written in 1968, is similar in tone to Ḥāwī’s “Lazarus”. The poet, ashamed and suffocating, stands before ‘Ā’isha, a symbol of Arab civilization, to see that “her hands are cut off on a cushion,” symbolic of powerlessness and disability. In the darkness of ‘Ā’isha’s braids, rats scuttle about, and worms “devour her eyes,” indicative of the prevalence of corruption and decay. ‘Ā’isha goes to her grave not quite dead; she is unable to live and unable to die. The poem reflects the inability of rebirth and revival, and symbolizes that the resurrection was false and that all the waiting was in vain. In the words of Muḥyī al-Dīn Ṣubḥī, ‘Ā’isha symbolizes a “false pregnancy.”<sup>6</sup>

On your mattress, Ishtar,  
I laid you down to die

...

I walked sober and drunk through the house of the dead.  
Through the ruins of Babylon,  
Along the river shore,  
Alone  
I spoke to clouds,  
Wallowed in dust,  
Shouted out in despair.

In “Lament for the June Sun,” a moving poem of self-condemnation written immediately after the 1967 defeat, al-Bayyātī highlights the deficiencies of Arab society and the death in life of the Arab nation. He bitterly criticized the Arabs and attacked the corruption of the Arab rulers who deceived their people with propaganda, cover-ups, and misleading news broadcasts about the reality of their situ-

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University of Sanaa, 1989–1990). See also *Kalimāt*, Quarterly Cultural Review, 10/11 (1989) and 15, (1991).

<sup>6</sup> See Muḥyie al-Dīn Subḥie, *Vision in Al-Bayyātī’s Poetry* (Baghdad: Dār al-Shu’ūn al-Thaqāfiya al-‘Āmma, 1987).

ation. In beautiful images and simple language, al-Bayyātī lamented the plight of the Arabs:

We were ground in the coffeehouses of the East by  
 War of words, wooden swords  
 Lies and empty heroes.  
 We did not kill a camel or a grouse  
 We did not try the game of death

....

Trivia preoccupied us  
 We killed each other and now we are crumbs.  
 In the coffeehouses of the East we swat at flies  
 We are the generation of meaningless death  
 the recipients of alms.

....

The sun of June left our genitals naked  
 Why did they leave us for the dogs, corpses without prayers  
 Carrying the crucified nation in one hand and dust in the other?

Still, al-Bayyātī ends his poem on an optimistic note, saying that the leaders, not the people, were defeated:

We were not defeated  
 The giant peacocks alone were defeated  
 Quicker than the flicker of a flame.

In a more sophisticated and complicated poem, "The Nightmare of Day and Night," from his collection *Writing on Clay*, 1970, Al-Bayyātī composed in a quieter tone, but used rich, powerful, surrealistic images and symbols to convey the state of psychological siege of the post-1967 years in the Arab world. He revealed the transformation of a disillusioned dream into a nightmare in which one is unable to even find a place to bury one's own corpse. This poem demonstrates a profound awareness of the complexities of Arab life in this confused age of defeat and absurdity and the sharp contradictions between reality and dream:

While the earth dreams of the birth of a prophet—  
 who will fill the horizons with justice—  
 and of the birth of the seasons,  
 I carry a corpse in the street  
 At nightfall  
 I will bury it in a brothel or a park  
 or a coffeehouse or a tavern of light,  
 Hiding my face from God and from you,  
 Ashamed and drunk, I cry.

The Syrian poet Adonis, one of the most committed to cultural and poetic change in the Arab world, is known as the “tireless advocator of modernity.” His book, *The Static and Dynamic*, 1974, was a landmark in the intellectual provocation for radical and immediate changes. “In the verses of Adonis,” M.M. Badawi writes, “the modernism in modern Arabic poetry has been achieved.”<sup>7</sup> In a poem written after the 1967 defeat and published in the poet’s 1969 collection *This Is My Name*, Adonis touches upon the same theme as al-Bayyātī’s “Lament for the June Sun.” Adonis views the Arab nation as broken and defeated, and as a corpse wrapped in shrouds. Nothing remains save madness:

I have said  
 This broken jar is a defeated nation!  
 I see the shadow of a crow  
 Upon the face of my country.  
 I name this book a shroud,  
 I name this city a corpse.  
 Madness!  
 Only madness remains!

While al-Bayyātī suffered continuous exile for his political belief, the Bahraini poet Qāsim Ḥaddād was tortured and imprisoned for five years for his belief in the need for radical revolution in Arab society in order to achieve freedom and justice. An important figure in the process of modernity, he called for democracy and protested tyranny and oppression. In his poem “Sin Number Three,” Ḥaddād voices disgust at oppressive Arab regimes, along with a challenge:

O King:  
 We are the flocks, of which you boast to other nations  
 But we are fed up with this false glory.<sup>8</sup>

The Syrian poet Nizār Qabbānī, the most renowned contemporary love poet in the Arab world, also became a powerful voice in the battle of social and political change. After the 1967 defeat, he wrote “woman has been my beloved and she still is, but I am now taking a second wife; her name is Homeland”.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> M.M. Badawi, *A Short History of Modern Arabic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 75.

<sup>8</sup> *Uzlat al-Kalimāt* (Cairo: al-Ghad Publishing House, 1985), 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Hal Tasma'in Şahil Ahzānī* (Beirut: Manshūrāt Nizār Qabbānī, 1991), 32.

Oh, my homeland  
 You have changed me in a single moment  
 From a poet writing of love and longing  
 To a poet writing with a knife.

His poem, "Marginal Notes on the Book of Defeat," which he wrote immediately after the 1967 defeat, was harshly critical of both the Arab peoples and the Arab leaders:

This is the secret of our tragedy:  
 Our cries are more powerful than our voices  
 Our swords are taller than our men  
 . . . .

O Sultan, O my lord,  
 I was beaten with shoes,  
 Your soldiers forced me to eat out of my shoes.  
 Twice you have lost the war  
 Because you cut out the tongues of half your people.  
 What use are a people who cannot speak?

The Iraqi poet Muẓaffar al-Nawwāb faced dire personal consequences for his political verses; he was forced to live underground most of his life because of his biting satire focusing on the corruption of Arab leaders and their establishments. Although his poetry was banned in all parts of the Arab world, it has been xeroxed and memorized. He spent his life in exile, hiding from one place to another to avoid imprisonment and torture. Al-Nawwāb attacked virtually all Arab leaders and satirized many, if not all, major political events in the Middle East. In his collection, *Watariyyāt Layliyya*, he calls all of the Arab leaders "traitors" and "defeated" and in a poem addressed to them entitled "Sons of Bitches Without Exception," he depicted Palestine as a young virgin being raped by the Israelis while Arab leaders gathered to hear from behind the door the sounds of her pains at her deflowerment. According to al-Nawwāb, even ants and dogs would have fought or done something about such an insult; instead, these leaders shouted at her from behind the door not to scream to avoid a scandal. Al-Nawwāb became the voice of the silent majority who saw that their leaders and their governments had conspired against them.

The Iraqi poet Badr Shākīr al-Sayyāb (d. 1964) was also forced into exile and hunted by the authorities of his country. In "Hymn of the Rain," 1954, which is in the words of Nājī 'Allūsh, "the most

committed political poem written by al-Sayyāb,<sup>10</sup> the poet, who was living in exile in Kuwait at that time and swept by homesickness, describes the injustice of the political and social situation in Iraq. The poet watches Iraq from across the border—the rain falling and the crops growing, only to be eaten by ravens and locusts, symbols of corrupt Iraqi government officials and an oppressive social system. The rain, a life-giving force and symbol of fertility, serves only to perpetuate the hunger and misery of the Iraqi people, who never get to reap the harvest of their slave labor:

Despite the rain,  
 Not a year has passed without famine in Iraq!  
 Do you know what sadness the rain evokes?  
 And how the roof-gutters of the poor  
 Sob when it pours?

Nevertheless, in the final verse of the poem, he gave hope for political salvation:

Iraq will grow green with the rain,  
 And the rain pours.

As for Palestinian poets, they focused their anger and bitterness on the Israelis, the Arab states, and the West. They have long described their countrymen as victims of history, but also as courageous heroes fighting to redeem their people. The underlying tenets of Palestinian poetry have been resistance and defiance, determination in their struggle, and continuing faith in their ultimate victory. However, attempts to rigidly classify Palestinian poetry have been invalidated by the writing of such poets as Fadwā Ṭūqān. Although she was classified by Aḥmad Daḥbūr as a romantic poet,<sup>11</sup> she has been deeply committed to her national cause. Salma Jayyusi calls this poetess one of the “most powerful voices raised in defense of her people and their rights.” In fact, so powerful was her political poetry, that it caused the prominent Israeli personality Moshe Dayan to say that just one of Fadwa Touqan’s poems “is enough to create ten fighters for the Palestinian resistance.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Nājī ‘Allūsh, *The Collected Works of Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb* (in Arabic) (Beirut: Dār al-‘Awda, 1986), see introduction.

<sup>11</sup> See Aḥmad Daḥbūr, *Al-Karmel*, issue 44, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> See Salma Jayyusi, in her introduction to *A Mountainous Journey: an Autobiography of Fadwa Tuqan*. See also Jayyusi’s *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, 8, 20.

The Palestinian poet Tawfīq Zayyād used simple language and expressions of daily life, often mixed with colloquial dialect, to transform his verses into weapons of defiance in support of the Palestinian liberation movement. His defiant verses were put to music and became national emblems of the Palestinian struggle. So powerful was their language and so enchanting their musicality, that they have been an enduring source of inspiration and spiritual strength for Palestinians and they were chanted by children during the Intifada. As such, Zayyād's songs have become an integral part of Palestinian resistance ideology:

Here we shall stay  
Like a wall upon your chest  
And never leave.

The defeat of the Arabs in June 1967 strengthened the will and determination of the Palestinians against Israeli occupation. Palestinian poets such as Samīḥ al-Qāsim (b. 1939) emerged out of the Arab defeat as the strongest poets in the Arab world in their unwavering determination to continue the struggle. Not only did their earlier poetry play a formative role in mobilizing the Palestinian people to revolt, but their works also helped restore and strengthen the spirit of the Arab people by calling for renewed resistance and dedication to the cause of Arab nationalism.

More than any other poet, Maḥmūd Darwīsh (b. 1942) focused on the Palestinian homeland and demonstrated a great deal of courage and resistance to Israeli occupation. A great Palestinian poet, and one of the greatest modern Arab poets, Maḥmūd Darwīsh is a poet of sophistication, complexity, and universal appeal, and his verses are also the most potent at politically mobilizing the Palestinian people. As a result, Darwīsh became a symbol of heroic defiance, and his verses have been recited throughout the Arab world with a great sense of pride. He challenged the Israelis while living under their occupation:

Write down I am an Arab!  
You stole my forefathers' groves and the land I used to till  
You left me nothing but these rocks.  
And from them, I must wrest a loaf of bread  
For my eight children.  
Write down on the top of the first page:  
I neither hate others nor steal their property,  
But when I am hungry  
I will eat the flesh of my usurper!

In 1971, Darwīsh left Israel and joined the Palestinian Diaspora in the Arab world. He was received as a hero and maintained his status as the foremost Palestinian poet. He has continued to draw attention to the great problems facing the Palestinians in their struggle for a homeland, and to the internal and external conspiracies to abort this struggle. After the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, when the PLO was forced to move its headquarters to Tunis and the Palestinian revolution seemed to have come to a standstill, Darwīsh remained determined to continue the Palestinian struggle:

A dark night will come,  
When there will be fewer roses.  
But even then,  
I shall continue my song  
With the same force.

The theme of exile and continual Palestinian displacement<sup>†</sup> is most elegantly conveyed in the following of Darwīsh's verses:

I gave my picture to my beloved:  
"If I die, hang it up on the wall."  
She asked: "Is there a wall for it?"  
I answered: "We will build a wall."  
"Where, in what house?"  
"We will build a house."  
"Where, on which spot of exile?"

In an effort to rescue Arab society from its prolonged spiritual death, Arab poets have resorted to myths and archetypal images of the "savior" and the "redeemer" in their struggle to keep alive the dream of Arab renewal. They employed a variety of myths from the ancient Near East, including Ishtar, Tammuz (Adonis), Baal, and variations of them. In addition, they invented their own symbols, and assumed the persona of archetypal figures from history, the Bible, the Qur'ān and Greek mythology. Some poets put on the mask of Noah in an attempt to express to the readers the possibility of building a better world after the flood, which symbolizes the destruction of Arab civilization. Others became Ulysses or Sinbad, and expressed the restlessness of the Arab man on an endless quest towards a far-off destination. Some poets invoked Prometheus, Sisyphus, Mihyar, Job, and al-Ḥallāj, as well as other myths which make up what Carl Jung calls the "archetypes of the collective unconscious."

The fact that the poet Aḥmad 'Alī Sa'īd deliberately chose to

write under the pen-name Adonis since early in his poetic career is reflective of his deep belief in the myth of resurrection after death. Adonis has used several different variations of the "myth of the eternal return," including the myth of the Phoenix, a legendary Arabian bird, who, when facing imminent death, consumed itself in fire and rose renewed from the ashes to start another long life. In his poem "Resurrection and Ashes," Adonis begins with a dream:

I dream that I have an ember in my hands  
Which came to me on a wing of a bird  
From a far-off horizon.

The ember, which was brought to the poet on the wings of the Phoenix, united the poet with the myth and infused new life into the poet's lungs:

I am carried away by its incense  
To a country which I both know and do not know.  
Where it is said:  
There is a bird in love with its death  
Who, for the sake of a new beginning  
Will burn itself alive.

Thus, the poet became like the Phoenix; holding fire in his lips and breathing fire out of his lungs, he burns the corruption and stagnation of his society, purifies its spirit and gives it a new beginning. Then the poet detaches himself from the bird, and addresses it:

O Phoenix,  
At this moment of your resurrection,  
From ashes, sparks and flames  
Spring crept into the roots!

He links the Phoenix with the myth of Tammuz, whose blood fertilized the entire country. Here, the poet's words are his blood and his sacrifice, which will fertilize his nation and bring new life to the Arabs. In the end of the poem, Adonis prostrates himself in a ritual supplication to the Phoenix, praying that it should carry through with the death process in order that his dream be realized:

Here I bend my knee  
In humility.  
O Phoenix! Let me dream for one last time!  
Let me embrace the flames and vanish in them!

Other poets employed Jesus and his crucifixion as a myth of resurrection. They gave the story of Christ a national dimension; it became a symbol of sacrifice and martyrdom necessary for the forthcoming resurrection of a nation. For al-Sayyāb, who was able to Arabize almost all the myths he used, "Christ and the Cross became, in his hands, a part of a human heritage no less Arab than anything else."<sup>13</sup> In his poem, "Christ After Crucifixion," the poet speaks in the voice of Jesus, thus drawing the parallel between Jesus and the Arab man: both are victims of tyranny, injustice, and corruption, and both are tortured, beaten and murdered. However, the nail which pierced the body of the speaker in the poem does not kill him:

The wounds from the cross which they nailed me to,  
The whole afternoon, did not kill me.

Both poet and Jesus serve as god, redeemer, and life-giver to the people:

I died that the bread might be eaten in my name,  
That every season they will sow me in the earth!  
So I will become the seed of future generations.

Thus, in the poem, Jesus becomes symbolic of the revolutionary Arab fighter, who martyrs himself for his cause. Only with such a death will the birth-pains of the Arab nation begin:

After they nailed me  
I cast my glance towards the city,  
And saw a flowering forest.  
Everywhere there was a cross  
And next to it, a sorrowful mother.  
Blessed be the Lord  
These are the birth-pains of the city!

Khalīl Ḥāwī also saw himself as a Christ figure who carries the suffering of his nation as a burden on his shoulders. With a boundless love for his people, he stretched out his body as a bridge, just as Jesus stretched out his body on the cross to save humanity. The ribs of the poet's body become a bridge on which the revolutionaries will march towards a brighter future:

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<sup>13</sup> Salma Jayussi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Literature*, Vol. II (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1977), 722-724.

They cross the bridge at dawn, light-footed,  
 My ribs laid out before them as a solid bridge.  
 From the caves and the swamps of the old East,  
 They cross into the new East.  
 My ribs are their solid bridge.

The very same poets who viciously criticized their society are the ones who actually loved it the most fervently. They rejected the slow death of the Arab nation and took on the role of savior, redeemer, and prophet of change. They made use of myths of death and rebirth as an expression of hope for the resurgence of the Arab spirit after a long period of stagnation. Unfortunately, the vision of these Arab poets, who thought of themselves as prophets and saviors, was not achieved. Some poets began to be disillusioned and to lose faith in their ability to inspire change in their society. Their struggles, their battles fought with words, began to seem futile. As a consequence, more and more poets fell to despair.

In his poem "Jaykūr wa al-Madīna," al-Sayyāb's vision for change ended in despair. Issa Boullata writes that, while al-Sayyāb "remains the revolutionary he has always been, he begins to express the sentiment that the struggle is in vain."<sup>14</sup> The city in this poem is associated with evil, oppression, political and social corruption, and spiritual death, while the poet's village, Jaykūr, represents peace, purity and goodness. Al-Sayyāb depicts the roads of the city as "ropes of mud" wrapping around his heart, and "cables of fire" devouring the fields, leaving in them no more than ashes of hate. A wall is built around the village with a locked gate, keeping it beyond reach, and the poet is powerless to return. As Jaykūr becomes drowned in stillness, the poet surrenders.

Al-Bayyātī's city is also a symbol of the unfortunate situation in which the Arabs are living today. The Arab city, like Arab reality, is full of confusion and contradictions, corrupt leaders and thieves, gallows and prisons and incinerators. Al-Bayyātī likens the Arab man of this age of defeat to "a postage stamp" glued on everything. The orphan children of society wander about, searching in garbage dumps for a bone or for a "moon dying upon the corpses of houses." The Arab man is for sale, displayed in the storefronts of the city, while:

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<sup>14</sup> 'Īsā Bullāṭa (Issa Boullata), *Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb: Hayātuh wa Shī'rūh* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār, 1971), 96.

The policemen, the sodomites, and the pimps  
 Spit in his eyes  
 As he lays shackled.

The city has become a major theme in modern Arabic poetry. The city, Iḥsān ‘Abbās writes, is used in poetry as a mirror to “reflect the poet’s ideological position.”<sup>15</sup> Without exception, the Arab artist’s position towards the city was one of hatred and rejection. In al-Bayyātī’s poetry, for example, the city symbolizes the ebb and flow of Iraqi political life. The city is a center for corruption, injustice and political conspiracies, and is employed as a symbol of evil, oppression, and alienation. It is also a symbol of cruelty, inhumanity, and lost innocence. As a result, poets are rejecting the ills of contemporary Arab society when they reject the modern city.<sup>16</sup>

The Egyptian poet Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Mu‘ṭī Ḥijāzī (b. 1935) wrote in his poem “City Without Heart,” that the city is like death, both spiritual and physical. It is a source of fear and uncertainty, where humanity is cheated and betrayed by fellow humans. People are alienated from each other, they live and die alone and feel nothing. In this poem, a boy, coming from the village to look for a job in Cairo, is run over by a car:

Not an eye wept because,  
 In the big city people are no more than numbers:  
 One boy came, one boy died.  
 They dumped his body in a white car  
 A green fly hovered above the spot  
 Stained by his blood.

Even New York City has not escaped attack by Arab poets. In his poem “A Grave for New York”, Adonis depicts the city of New York as a woman “lifting in one hand a rag called liberty, and with the other suffocating a child called the earth.” He sees New York as an “archetypal city” of imperial power, which dominates the entire world while its black community lives in desperate misery. Adonis also attacks Arab cities for being the willing customers, or victims, of New York cultural exports. Likewise, al-Bayyātī, in his poem “A Funeral Mass for the City of New York,” describes New York as “a

<sup>15</sup> See Ihsan Abbas, *Directions of Contemporary Arabic Poetry* (in Arabic) (Kuwait: Al-Majlis al-Waṭanī li l-Thaqāfa wa al-Funūn wa l-Ādāb, 1978), 175.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

ferocious beast” and as a place where everything is for sale “Pay a dollar and kill a man”—all is in the “name of the law.” According to al-Bayyātī, leaders from all continents come to New York to sell themselves.

The future of the Arabs in the eyes of Khalīl Ḥāwī remains dark and the struggle is futile. Ḥāwī could see no light in the future, only darkness and corruption. His “Lazarus,” dragged to death not only his wife but the whole Arab nation. For Ḥāwī, Arab society can no longer be revived, and the Arab man can no longer be saved:

The light in his eyes is dead.  
Nothing can save him:  
Neither a heroic deed nor a humble prayer.

Al-Sayyāb’s vision in “The City of Sindbad,” is equally as nightmarish and tragic as Ḥāwī’s, and serves as an example of another poet’s loss of faith in the future. This poem describes a deformed resurrection but this time when God finally answers prayers for rain, He sends blood in the form of rain. Such rain brings not the fulfillment of years of waiting and expectations, but futility and death:

Flowers are not blooming,  
Black fields have no water  
Sickles reap nothing.

Al-Sayyāb, like his contemporaries, looked around himself and saw that heroism was defeated, streets were crowded with the dead, fields were barren, and the leaders were acting like Tatars. Not only was Christ nailed to the cross and crucified, but also the poet and the prophet Muḥammad:

Blood boiled up in the feet of the prophet,  
In his hands and in his eyes.  
In his eyelids, the God was burned.

Al-Sayyāb tells us in this poem that Christ was not resurrected but that the hungry people only imagined that he rolled back the stone from the tomb, cured the leper and made the blind see. He also tells us that Christ never brought Lazarus back to life, but that he left him to sleep while his flesh dried in strips and was sold in the city of sinners, blood and bullets, while:

Women are aborting in the slaughterhouses!  
The flames are dancing on the threshing floors!  
Christ will perish before Lazarus.

The poet sees only bones in the country, daggers, and dogs—no water or green fields. Even the moon has disappeared. Only Judas is active, serving as a symbol of treachery, deception, and the secret police, who wear the colors of blood and who “set the dogs on houses” and the cradles of little children.

The Lebanese poet Yūsuf al-Khāl (d. 1987) shares this tragic vision in his poem “The Deserted Well,” in which he describes a well which people pass by, but neither drink from it nor throw a stone in it. They feel apathetic after they discover that their toil was in vain, and their tears of waiting for salvation changed into tears of humiliation and defeat. Al-Khāl came close to calling on people to resign from the struggle:

Someone shouted at them: retreat, retreat!  
In the shelter at the rear there is a place  
Safe from bullets and death.

Some said it was madness  
Perhaps it was.

Al-Bayyātī once said that a poet is compelled in the core of his being to be “burned with others when he sees them burning and not to stand on the other side of the bank absorbed in prayer,” a statement that demonstrates his commitment to the use of poetry for social and political change. And yet he, too, had doubts about the ability of poetry to affect reality, and often his verses are darkened by this skepticism. His verses are those of a wounded man who continues to raise questions about salvation. After years of continuous struggle, al-Bayyātī asks in “Eye of the Sun”, 1971:

Who will stop the bleeding in the memory  
Of the man destined to be hanged?  
Who will wear the robe  
Of the saint and the martyr?  
Who will burn like me  
In the fire of yearning?

Al-Bayyātī doubts whether anyone will wear the robe of a martyr. In his poem “Reading from the Book of al-Tawwāsīn by al-Ḥallāj,” 1975 he puts on the robe of such a martyr, an archetype of heroism and great courage, who was crucified mainly for his social and political beliefs. Through him al-Bayyātī laments the Arab reality. The poet becomes another Ḥallāj, who sees only a wall of stone separating thousands of poor, desperate people from freedom and

justice. The poet comes closer to this wall, which also separates words from actions, and true from false, only to discover that it is surrounded by another wall, then another wall, which keeps rising and rising. He sees that the polar star has disappeared and that there is no way out:

I shout, terrified, at the base of the wall  
 Why is man crammed with death in this exile.  
 Why, O lord, this silence of man?

When he hears nothing, he asks the Lord for an answer:

Why, my Lord, did you not raise your clement hand  
 In the face of evil coming through all doors?

As God does not answer him, al-Bayyātī ends his poem on a note of doubt tempered with hope. All the poor gather, around the fire:

In this night  
 Haunted by the fever of something  
 Which might or might not  
 Come from behind the walls.

In moments of despair, al-Bayyātī believes that the Arab man has been sentenced to death by leaders who use him as a puppet in the game of death which has been repeated throughout history. He betrays such a trap in "A Conversation of a Stone," 1989:

One stone said to another:  
 I am not happy by this naked fence  
 My place is in the palace of the sultan.  
 The other said:  
 It is no use!  
 Tomorrow this palace will be destroyed, as well this fence  
 By an order of the sultan's men  
 Who will repeat this game anew.

Khalīl Ḥāwī in "The Cave," 1965 is far more pessimistic. In this contemporary era, he sees in the Arab world only dead fish and rotten fruits, corpses and ghosts, and boats tipping into the sea. He senses a spell of darkness falling over the Arab world, a complete stagnation and a slow death. A process in which minutes seem like centuries, in which time is frozen still:

The hands of the clock do not turn:  
 My God, how the minutes stretch their legs  
 And freeze, changing into ages.

This frozen desert of time is matched by the dead clay which Ḥāwī describes in “The Sailor and the Dervish.” Nothing amounts to more than “clay for clay”:

How often I died with dead clay!  
 Leave me alone with the sea, the wind, and death  
 Which spreads blue shrouds for the drowned.

For Ḥāwī, the Arab tragedy had escalated to such an extent that death became the only solution. As expressed in “Lazarus,” Ḥāwī perceived the resurrection of Arab society as deformed and disfigured since, as Rītā ‘Awaḍ wrote, “he saw the present reality as a continuation of the age of decline.” Although “this very vision was painful to the poet and he wished it to be different,”<sup>17</sup> he felt that the only protest left for him was to take his own life. Ḥāwī, a man of great passion and sensitivity, never overcame his disillusionment. He shot himself in the head the day after the Israeli army invaded Lebanon on June 6, 1982, which also marked the fifteenth anniversary of the June 1967 War. Thus he united his reality with his vision, decrying and proclaiming, in the words of Maḥmūd Shurayḥ, “the defeat of an entire nation.”<sup>18</sup>

This leads us to the following questions: Can poetry change the world? More specifically, can Arabic poetry with its revolutionary vision change the reality of Arab society? Can it help to bring justice, unity and freedom? Or can any literary, ideological or political movement succeed in bringing change? And what is the future of Arab society?

The world in the past few decades has been in a constant flux. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the fall of the Soviet political structure ended the Cold War. Many oppressive regimes were overthrown, and new nations were born. In many instances, visionaries have replaced dictators, geographical borders have been redrawn, and the promise of change has been realized. Significant steps towards freedom and democracy have been achieved in virtually all corners of the globe except in the Arab world. Unfortunately, the Arab peoples on the whole still enjoy little or no democracy or freedom. They

<sup>17</sup> Rītā ‘Awaḍ, *The Collected Works of Khalīl Ḥāwī* (Beirut: Dār al-Awda, 1993), see introduction.

<sup>18</sup> See Maḥmūd Shurayḥ, *Khalīl Ḥāwī wa Antūn Sa‘āda* (Sweden: Dār Nelson, 1995).

continue to live in fear of dictators and oppressive governments with full hold on the reins of power. Arab poets, along with other literary activists, and other intellectual and political movements have long been calling for change, but these efforts seem to have failed in bringing results. The Arab world has not only remained stagnant but also, in some instances, governments seem to be getting more oppressive.

Philip Khoury noted that "not even the idea of Arab nationalism has helped,"<sup>19</sup> while Hisham Sharabi stated that what is needed is a radical upheaval of the entire social and political system in order to free Arab society from corruption and patriarchy.<sup>20</sup> Halim Barakat maintained that the only hope for the future of Arab society is the institutionalization of democracy, freedom, secularism and social justice<sup>21</sup> while Qustantin Zurayq argued that the only way out of stagnation is to change Arab powerlessness into power.<sup>22</sup> However, none of these Arab intellectuals has been able to articulate exactly how these changes could be achieved.

Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb writes that poetry, by its nature, is a reflection of reality. Thus, if the reality is dark, so must be the poetry. Yet, he also believes that as long as life continues, there remains hope for salvation and for the reawakening of the spirit. The responsibility of poetry is to keep alive this hope and nurture it to fruition.<sup>23</sup> In fact, at one point, al-Sayyāb believed that the salvation of Arab society would come about through his own personal death. He spoke as though he were another Christ and another redeemer! In his poem "The River and Death," he wrote:

In the depths of my blood,  
I long to carry the burden of the people  
And to resurrect life.  
My death is a victory.

Kamal Abu Deeb rejected the last line of this poem, remarking that the death of al-Sayyāb was not victorious, but pathetic! It was no

<sup>19</sup> Philip Khoury, "Syrian Political Culture in the Light of the Notables Paradigm; 1800 to the Present", lecture at Yale University, April 22, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> See Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> See Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State* (California University Press, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Qustantin Zurayq, *The Meaning of the Disaster Anew* (Beirut, 1970).

<sup>23</sup> Issa Boullata, *Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb*, 176.

more significant than a normal death. The deaths of Ghassān Kanafānī and Ḥusayn Muruwwa were more tragic, yet, even their deaths did not result in changing the world. He wrote that we live in a frightening age, and that there was, in the past, at some moment in history “an Arab dream and a vision of a glowing future,” but the dream has “shattered as well as the world.” The Arab man is paralyzed by fear and therefore his “ineffectiveness in making change has reached an extremely tragic point.” What is left is “absurdity and madness,” which became the “new vision and reality.” The world has truly collapsed and modern Arabic poetry is a reflection of such a collapse. “It is a poetry of conflicts, oppositions, and negations, and fragmentations of self and of text.” He adds that with the “crumbling of the socio-political nationalist revivalist projects, a process of fragmentation began and is still going on,” a process reflected in the development of “structureless poetry.”<sup>24</sup>

Issa Boullata remarked on the other hand that poetry was not meant to provide philosophical or tangible solutions to the problems of society, but only to raise questions about the mysteries of life, death, human existence and human anguish, and to shed light on difficult existential matters. Thus, by depicting man as lonely, confused and powerless in challenging his fate, or by portraying the tragedies of the modern age, Arabic poetry assists humans in confronting these questions head-on and in dealing with their anxiety and pain.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps Qāsim Ḥaddād best expressed the tragic reality of these psychological and spiritual disturbances. He has rejected this entire age and expressed the bitterness of Arab intellectuals towards their governments, a bitterness mixed with restlessness and disgust. He speaks in his poetry about the misery, anguish and absurdity of the present, and reflects the deep anxiety of the Arabs and their loss of direction. He portrays the fear and the deep inner void of the oppressed Arab man in a shattered age and “formless” society, where “the dead ask the dead for directions,” the death is slow and “dragged by mules,” and women are raped by “mad horses” and impregnated with their tyrannical genes in order to give the kingdom “clones of their tyranny.” On the horizon, there is only the “guardian dust which writes its false commands.” For Ḥaddād, nothing makes sense

<sup>24</sup> See Kamal Abu Deeb in “Conflicts, Oppositions, Negations,” *Kalimāt*: 10/11, 34.

<sup>25</sup> Issa Boullata, *Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb*.

and all is "tragic." There are no longer bold sailors to save him from drowning in the sea. As he mentioned in his poetry, only his "hallucinations" have delayed his suicide.<sup>26</sup>

In *Al-Jawashin* (1989), co-written with Amīn Ṣāliḥ, in a poetic text entitled "We Tell The Meaningless Tale," the authors wrote about the upside-down and insane world around them, with a voice comprehending such absurdity but with strength and rejection:

"You are ignorant. You do not understand."

"O.K. I do not understand. I do not understand what you understand. But at least I did something. I spat on one of their faces."

"And what did it bring you? He slapped you on the face and left you on the floor."

"Fine. But when I looked in his eyes, I saw fear. He was afraid of me. Nobody noticed. He himself thought he was not afraid. I am the only one who saw it. And that is enough for me to feel a little proud."

In *Space* Ḥaddād confesses that he does not know the answer to the questions that plague him; he only sees towers of chaos:

I do not know why  
I sit this way:  
My head the hat of the universe and my hands in a frenzy.  
I see only whiteness—towers of chaos.

In *Delirium*, he describes the diffusion of the dream into a cloud of chaos and fear. Everything takes on a misty, ethereal, transitory and nebulous quality. The dream is arrested, as is the Arab man who clings to it:

I am neither asleep nor awake,  
Yet the enchanted dream dazzles me.  
The same dream interrupts my every waking and my every sleep  
A group of angels leads me.  
They say:  
Do not open your eyes and do not close them,  
Do not sleep and do not wake.

There are no answers, Ḥaddād writes in "Interrogation" because:

We are terrified rabbits,  
Falling into whiteness.

<sup>26</sup> *Uzlat al-Kalimāt*, 36.

Al-Bayyātī contributes to this dismal vision the images of a present and future inhabited by fears and ghosts, prisons and police, exile and banishment. In "Love Poem at the Seven Gates of the World," he writes:

I now discover the oppressors of the new world.  
 The actors have changed their masks.  
 The world has fallen into the clutches of the prompter  
 Who crouches in the shadow.  
 They killed us before we loved each other  
 And then they dyed the theatre with our blood.

The Syrian poet Muḥammad al-Māghūṭ (b. 1930) speaks about the Arab man as a victim oppressed by a frightening reality. While most contemporary poets voice protest, al-Māghūṭ voices resignation. Not only does al-Māghūṭ express the sentiment of defeat, but also the despair born from a total defeat in a defeated land:

You have defeated me!  
 But in all this beaten land  
 I can find no proper hill  
 On which to hang my banner of surrender!

The terror voiced in the poetry of al-Māghūṭ and Qāsim Ḥaddād harkens back to the visionary words of Tawfīq Ṣāyigh (d. 1971), written more than three decades ago. When the poet was still alive, his words were dismissed by critics as being irrelevant to the spirit of the times. Now, however, long after his death, his words have become extremely relevant:

My summer is emptiness  
 My winter is horror  
 And my life is a train passing between them whistling!

For Ṣāyigh, poetry is what sustained him in an absurd and frightening world. In the words of Mounah Khouri, it allowed him to "endure the tragedy of more than one paradise lost." Thus, when his words dried up, he did not find the strength to keep living, and he "found in death his trustworthy savior."<sup>27</sup>

In the last fifty years, seeing that the dream of Arab renewal was not materializing, and seeing that their pain and struggles were in

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<sup>27</sup> See Mounah Khouri, *Studies in Contemporary Arabic Poetry and Criticism* (Jahan Book Co., 1987).

vain, many Arab poets became disillusioned and fell into despair. Many poets, seeing that their words fell on deaf ears or evaporated in the darkening air, fell silent. Some began to write in circles, or became introverted and wrote only for themselves. Nevertheless, many poets continue to struggle. And they continue, because they must continue, to fight the battle for national, cultural, social and political change. They know well that they are not fighting alone, but representing an entire people. More than once in his poetry, Adonis writes "I am not alone." Al-Bayyātī writes for the "oppressed Arab poor from shore to shore," Qabbānī is the "voice of the voiceless" and Unsī al-Ḥājj states, "I must continue to dream." Indeed, Arab poets have vowed to continue the struggle, and they have continued to pay the price for their courage. In spite of, and because of, these injustices, Arab poets continue to be involved and continue to fight "against their age."

When Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayyātī accepted an invitation in 1996 to participate in a literary conference in Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi government considered his participation to be a public statement of his personal political opposition to Baghdad. As a result, the greatest Iraqi poet in modern times was blacklisted and his passport was invalidated. He responded with the words:

Who owns the homeland, my lady?  
The commissioned killer,  
The jailer,  
The man of rain,  
Or the poets?

Further, in 1996, al-Bayyātī published "The Dragon," which symbolizes the dictators in the Arab world. Although it could apply to any dictator who corrupts his country, steals the bread of his people, and drives them to their deaths, it was clearly addressed to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein:

A dictator,  
Masking his brutality,  
Claiming he cannot kill a bird,  
Kills men and crushes them.  
  
He named all the rivers  
In his name,  
All the streets and prisons  
In this oppressed nation.

Eventually, this dictator will be deposed only for another beast to emerge as his reincarnation. The new dictator will be crowned leader of this “betrayed nation,” and one will find:

His photo on display everywhere  
 In the cafés, cabarets, brothels  
 And markets.

Nizār Qabbānī, in a poem written in 1991 in “Marginal Notes on the Book of Defeat 1967–1991,” criticizes the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait:

All is illusion!  
 We have achieved no victory  
 Only one defeat after another.  
 Every twenty years, another military leader  
 Who aborts our dream and destroys our unity.  
 We die meaningless deaths,  
 Like flies in Africa.  
 We are voiceless, our lips are parched and sealed.  
 Madness dictates our decisions.

Several years later, in his poem, “I Am With Terrorism” 1997, Qabbānī strongly criticized the Oslo Peace Treaty with Israel, following particularly violent clashes due to renewed and enlarged Jewish settlements on land to be negotiated with the Palestinian Authority. Drawing a distinction between surrender and peace, he proclaimed that he, himself, had been accused of being a terrorist many times when defending the rights, civilization, culture, and dignity of the Arabs and their existence. He was accused of being a terrorist because he spoke out against the Arab leaders who had suddenly changed their role from “devoted nationalists” to “middlemen and agents.” In cases such as this, according to Qabbānī, one is compelled to come down on the side of “terrorism.”

Due to similar concerns, Maḥmūd Darwīsh resigned from his position in the PLO after a disagreement with Yasser Arafat about the content of the Peace Talks with Israel, which became the Oslo Accord signed September 13, 1993. He later protested the agreement in his long poem “The Native American Speech”:

Take my motherland by sword  
 But I will not sign my name on a peace treaty between  
 The victim and the murderer.

And in his book *Why Have You Left the Horse Alone* (1995), Darwīsh reconfirmed his complete rejection of the peace treaty with Israel. He expressed a deep sorrow for the victims who died as martyrs because their deaths turned out to be for nothing. Since the beginning of the peace process in the early 1990s, Darwīsh's position has not changed. His words echoed with the same tone—quieter, perhaps, but they have remained clear and firm. He repeated many times that “everything shall start all over again,” stressing the battle had not ended, but would begin again. Speaking as an artist who had lived under Israeli occupation, Darwīsh continued to articulate his personal fears that “tomorrow” would not fulfill the long-awaited dream for statehood and freedom for the Palestinians, therefore “this war will never end.”

Darwīsh and other leading Arab poets have long hoped that their writing and positions on national, social and political issues of the Arab world would result in significant and positive change. If poetry failed to change reality, and if the ideological movements and political parties failed as well to bring change, then how could change come about? And what is the role and function of poets and intellectuals in society?

Nietzsche wrote, “The ideal condition cannot be achieved by dreaming, we must fight and struggle to achieve it.”<sup>28</sup> Clearly, the fights and struggles of isolated poets and individuals have not succeeded in making change. Even if the best one hundred Arab poets loaded themselves with dynamite and exploded in the streets of Arab capitals, it would not be enough. For real change to come about, thousands of people will have to die; thousands must martyr themselves. It appears that only massive revolution will succeed in overturning the corrupt regimes of the Arab world. Only then can significant and radical change take place.

Goethe once said that if the age in which the poet lives is bad, then “the poet will encounter nothing to inspire him in the life that surrounds him.” But modern Arab poets dispute the truth of this quotation as they have continued to struggle. These poets will never lose faith and shall continue their roles as visionaries and involved

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<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1980), 81.

leaders. As the Arab scholar Hisham Sharabi said, “to fight the pessimism of the intellect, one must hold fast to the optimism of the will.”<sup>29</sup> This, above all, is the function and the role of the modern Arab poet who shall continue, through the power of words to provoke the people, to give them hope and to inspire them until real change has taken place.

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<sup>29</sup> See Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy*, 155.

## AL-BALDA AL-UKHRĀ: A META-TEXT UN-VEILED<sup>1</sup>

MONA N. MIKHAIL

Ibrāhīm ‘Abd al-Majīd (‘Abd al-Maguīd), a rising star on the Arab literary scene was awarded the American University in Cairo 1996 prize for his novel *Al-Balda al-Ukhrā*, a work that is as moving as it is cerebral, as poignant as it is daring. A tale of epic proportions heavily allegorical it is narrated in the first person. A tour de force, this work will prove to be a landmark in contemporary Arabic fiction. In January of 1997, he was recognized for his novel, *Lā Aḥad Yanām fī al-Iskandariyya*, by receiving the state award, Jā’izat al-Dawla al-Tashjī’iyya. Writing the Gulf, the life experiences as well as the seismic changes that are challenging this pivotal part of the world has been successful in Munif’s *Mudun al-Milḥ*, a classic of the genre. Other writers have written memorable works, to name but a few, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, Yūsuf al-Qa’īd, Iqbāl Baraka among many others.

‘Abd al-Majīd however gives us a tale of mythic proportions couched in the human drama of the daily life, of hundreds of “foreign nationals”, or those euphemistically labeled as “guest workers” throughout the Gulf countries. Although there are numerous sociological studies, conducted in the past decades attempting to assess the status of foreign workers, their impact on the host societies, as well as on their own, they never tell us enough about the inner workings, and the true suffering of these people. Aside from the vital remittances they transfer to their respective countries, which in some cases constitute the backbone of these Third World economies, not enough research has been undertaken to measure how the individual is impacted by such an experience.

Ibrāhīm ‘Abd al-Majīd’s *al-Balda al-Ukhrā* is an extraordinary document that sociologists, anthropologists as well as political scientists, will, I am sure, find most useful. This richly textured narrative is delivered in the most denuded of prose. The factual, yet elegant,

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s note: This article was originally published in *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 75–83 and is here reprinted with minor changes by kind permission from the *Arab Studies Quarterly*.

language is delivered in a naturalistic mode yet often surprises us with its gripping poeticness. ‘Abd a-Majīd, in re-creating this imaginary yet so real world carves for himself a lasting place amongst leading Arab writers. In three hundred and eighty seven pages divided into thirty chapters printed on butcher’s paper (thick) with an unassuming white and blue cover with a sketch of two-hands extended to each other but not touching, one holding what could be an apple, this is a work that was first published in London in 1991 dedicated to “Fāṭima”. We encounter some truly unforgettable characters, witness incredible happenings and are moved by the turmoil and sufferings of this multiracial motley crowd temporarily thrown together for the sole purpose of making enough money to send back remittances to their families and eventually to return to their countries throughout the Middle East, Asia, Africa Europe and America.

Edward Said in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* states: “A text distributes various textual intentions regularly and on several axes, what unifies these intentions or impulses is something very difficult to generalize about.”<sup>2</sup>

This work indeed operates on several axes. However I believe the pivotal axis for ‘Abd al-Majīd is a burning desire to write. The meta-text is the author’s agonizing search for the true self, the confrontation with what every artist/creator undergoes in the quest after that “holy grail” the creative impulse. It is in a sense, a Pilgrim’s Progress going through Sloughs of Despond.

Will I become once more a shining surface (mirror)? It is incumbent upon me to know everything about what I witness. To look at details like a well-seasoned consumer . . . and begin to write a diary, memoirs that will make what happened to me as though it didn’t really happen to me. For memoirs entail a state of consciousness which in turn defeats intuition (*wijdān*) . . . then I will not be beset with sorrow. If I could only remember who that cunning author is who wrote these words? . . . Ah, all writers are cunning and mostly all readers are not smart enough when they start believing them and proceed to live out lives not their own. A (cold) calculated theft of their precious time and lives, and yet no one complains. It was said that when Goethe wrote *The Sufferings of Werther*, hundreds of young romantic Germans committed suicide at a time when Romanticism ruled supreme in Germany, and where Napoleon had previously plundered its youth in war with his armies, yet it was Goethe by means of a small book who deci-

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), 220.

mated the youth of Germany . . . Lorca's poetry hadn't also saved the soldiers of the Republic, although they had carried them in their pockets next to their hearts. During my last visit to Cairo, Ṣalāḥ Maṣṣūr (read Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Ṣabūr, the late Egyptian poet?), he who had piercing eyes, was said to have collapsed in his bed after reciting Hamlet's famous soliloquy.

As soon as he had uttered "to be or not to be" he fell into an eternal sleep. I wonder how many Shakespeare has killed through his handsome Prince in the last five centuries and why should I go that far. I, Ismā'il Khidr Mūsā, who is always searching for the truth and is always behind at grasping reality, I too have been misled by Aḥmad 'Ākif and Naguib Mahfouz. I believed in them and trusted them and killed Amal. Yes it was a premeditated execution. I perhaps knew better what Aḥmad 'Ākif couldn't have known earlier on. I didn't want to engage in exhausting my own heart and those of other mortals. Ironically I succeeded in the first, but failed miserably in the second. I had read hundreds of books for the sake of learning how to write. I had read all but *Adab al-Kātib*, *al-Kāmīl*, *Al-Bayān wa l-Tabyīn*.

I let the (art) of writing flit away from my heart to the soles of my feet unto the ground to be treaded upon by forgetfulness and have rust cover it. Could this be my destiny? Or have I come here so far away to discover the reason and meaning of my existence. My God, thousands of miles away from all that which had moved my heart, here and now I discover that yes, I can go back and WRITE (emphasis added). But I have no wish to have my heart bleed again. For I am my own writer and I am my own reader, I will therefore be without doubt my own killer.<sup>3</sup>

'Abd a-Majīd, like all writers, agonizes over the act of writing; his wrenching cry from the heart is without doubt caused by that wound which does not heal until he actually produces the narrative, *al-Balda al-Ukhrā*.

In embarking on this odyssey, the narrator/writer dramatizes the historical structure, which enables us to partake of his point of view.<sup>4</sup> In reflecting on a "shinning" surface, he establishes what Pierre Macherey suggests: "The relationship between the mirror and what it reflects is partial. The mirror selects, it does not reflect everything."<sup>5</sup>

Pierre Macherey proceeds to add: "The selection itself is not fortuitous, it is symptomatic; it can tell us about the nature of the

<sup>3</sup> Ibrāhīm 'Abd a-Majīd, *Al-Balda al-Ukhrā* (London & Cairo, 1991), 362.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (London: Routledge, 1978), 113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

mirror . . . Thus the image of history in the mirror will not be a reflection in the precise sense of a reproduction or facsimile."<sup>6</sup>

"The notion of the mirror takes on a new meaning once it is supplemented by the idea of the analysis which defines the partiality of its reflections. But the analysis is itself deceptive since it tends to suggest that the real is the mechanical product of a montage. It must be interpreted in a way that does not sacrifice its real complexity. In actual fact it is not enough to say that the mirror catches a fragmented reality, the very image in the mirror is itself fragmented".<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, 'Abd al-Majīd, like Conrad, sees "everything in the tormenting framework of the writing life."<sup>8</sup>

"La solitude me gagne, elle m'absorbe. Je ne vois rien, je ne lis rien. C'est comme une espece de tombe, qui serait en meme temps un enfer, ou il faut ecrire, ecrire, ecrire."<sup>9</sup> We can safely deduce that the intense experiences lived in this work as well as their poignancy refract the agonies of the author's attempts at creativity.

In my room I stood with the notebook where I registered the letters, I actually wanted to register the number of mice I had killed and to write: Today is the 26th of March 1979 . . . the room engulfing me grew bigger and bigger and it was as if some cool refreshing water was being poured onto my chest. Why don't I start writing my memoirs today? Writing my diary will make of me a third person, I could then see with an eye that doesn't weigh down the heart with pain and suffering . . . who was that cunning author who wrote those words I once read somewhere, I cannot recall where? Well, I do not really care, I must return to my work.<sup>10</sup>

These interludes about the intense need to write, reflecting upon the creative act of writing are astutely, yet discretely, interspersed throughout a text that is otherwise richly layered with intricate events, and strange happenings that border on the absurd if not the hallucinatory. It is as if the act of writing would be the centering act that would help maintain the sanity of the narrator. Even his flashbacks about that very first love, Amal whom he could not commit to and who killed herself in desperation, what he vividly recalls of her was her interest in him as a budding writer. "Why don't you show me

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>8</sup> Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, 234.

<sup>9</sup> Macherey, 122.

<sup>10</sup> 'Abd al-Majīd, *Al-Balda al-Ukhrā*, 330.

what you have written?" I answered then "I don't think I will continue writing."<sup>11</sup>

The allegorical dimensions of this narrative are cleverly carried through the names of most of the protagonists. One is struck by the choices of names. The narrator/author is *Ismā'īl Khidr Mūsā*, thrice a prophet, the seer who "sees", who is also the sacrificial lamb. *Ismā'īl* agreed to go to Saudi to raise money to be able to provide decent dowries for his unmarried sisters, and later to provide medical expenses to his sick and dying mother. For he was to fulfill the "unfinished business" of his dead father, *Khidr*, the wise one and *Mūsā*, a leader to his people.

*Wadiha*, the Saudi young woman; she is clear and pristine, as the name suggests in Arabic. For her determination to find love she got herself into trouble. But we see her stand erect and unflinching when paraded in an effort to shame her for having dared to exchange feelings with a Yemeni man who, in turn, was jailed and tortured, and subsequently deported. *Wāḍiḥa*, clear in her mission, doesn't hesitate to kill, and to commit suicide when forced to marry a seventy-year old man, and when she cannot live to love.

Names can also have ironic reversed meanings, such as *Amal*, the first "hope" that was never to be. *Nabīl*, the not so "noble" or honorable young man who thought he was under a protective spell and that all those who had harmed him in the past would eventually pay with their lives. *Nabīl's* belief in the existence of flying saucers and extra-terrestrial beings, and his fear that these saucers would damage his already collapsing home in *Imbābah*, this most wretched of Cairene suburbs, overpopulated and infested with all the evils of sickness, neglect and poverty, lends an aura of mystery to the narrative. *Nabīl* always repeated that his mother used to say that he "was protected by Allah." He betrayed the trust put in him by his employer and embezzled money from the safe and attempted to flee the country. His premonitions of disaster concerning what he thought was his final departure from *Tabouk* were fulfilled. He actually managed to take a plane out of the country and for a moment he thought he had managed to go scot-free. But suddenly the flight was interrupted when the plane was forced to turn back after take-off because the authorities had discovered his theft. He returned to face his destiny

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

of torture, imprisonment and ultimate punishment. Al-Sayyid al-Gharīb, (the estranged) doctor, who was also on that same final flight, who would have remained to rot under his house arrest had not a Saudi colleague found him and remembered that they had been to the same medical college in Cairo, and used his influence to release him. He had been wrongly accused of sedition, the fate of many, such “strangers” in this land.

Maṣṣūr, the demented Saudi who runs around with a monkey on his shoulder, named “little Maṣṣūr” is “victorious” to the extent that he took his revenge on a society that had no compassion for the likes of him. In a final act he serves the elders of his tribe a beheaded monkey and lizards at a banquet he threw in their honor. That was an act of madness that echoed the disjointedness within his society. His unrequited love for Widād (the heart) brings his madness to a head after which he is committed to a mental asylum. In the whole narrative, he is the only one who curses the discovery of “oil” and its consequences. Aida, the mature love of Ismā’īl, is perhaps the only hope of a “return”, though she refuses to commit herself in a relationship until her paraplegic brother is cured. These names which I have mentioned so far are only some of the examples of names with allegorical allusions; there are more. One can elaborate further on the plethora of characters in this richly-layered work, even speculate on some of the “foreign” names of Pakistanis or Indians, but the above-mentioned examples are sufficient to make the point.

If beginnings of narratives are indications of the intentions of writers let us consider *al-Balda al-Ukhrā*’s inaugural lines: “The door of the plane flew open and I saw “the silence”. It is a rare thing to feel all over one’s back the draft of cool air from the A.C. while one’s face and chest meet the sun. No sooner had I stepped down from the small stairway and my feet had touched the ground than I felt the space around me, the ground beneath me, and I were one, flushed and void.<sup>12</sup>

From the very start the gender worlds are unequivocally defined and clearly laid out in two separate spaces. For example, the customs officer gives his stern commands that women were to stand in a separate line away from that of the men. Even Rose Marie, the American who is shamelessly aggressive and almost succeeds in seduc-

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 9.

ing and compromising Ismāʿīl in her husband's scam to defraud the Saudi employer, is a woman "apart".

The ensuing events and incidents that involve women, particularly native women are re-enactments of the strict separation between those two worlds. Though women are confined to a private space that has to remain inviolable, Ismāʿīl dares at least in his mind to transgress ironically at the foot of one of the holiest of places, the Ḥaram al-Sharīf in Medina. The irony as he notes elsewhere, is that on the pilgrimage, women are free to uncover their faces, as men should be in a state of grace, and lust should have no place in their hearts.

I felt perturbed by the women's movements in front of al-Ḥaram. Many are those who enter through the doors and exit with uncovered faces. Green eyes, blue eyes, black eyes. As one can recognize men's nationalities from their looks and dress, here one can recognize the women from their eyes. Those young, fresh faces were flowers floating on light. Through the black abaa's I could see red, white, green cor-sages, full of mystery. I couldn't get myself to lift my eyes to the heavens, or lower my gaze to the ground, my eyes remained at the same level of the eyes, cheeks, and faces of the women. 'Umar Ibn Abī Rabī'a was indeed no madman, when he went on the Hajj to flirt with women. I wonder what would happen if I were to go to Mecca [to do the same thing] (May God forgive me). What can I do about those eyes that steal you away from yourself, and the serenity these faces infuse the soul with, I am floating on a bed of mercury.<sup>13</sup>

Ismāʿīl our protagonist sees for the first time Wāḍiḥa, who will subsequently become his lover, being paraded in shame standing erect shrouded in black from head to toe, next to a soldier both riding an open half truck throughout the center of Tabouk, the godforsaken town scene of the action in this novel. The frenzied, brass-buttoned uniformed soldier shouting at the top of his voice in a deafening microphone: "Wāḍiḥa bint Sulaymān, bin Sabīl. the pupil from the 'Azīziyya Middle School used to leave after school with Bin Abdallāh al-Yami, the Yemeni and go to the deserted road of Taynia. Al-Yami has not raped her but because of her terrible deed, she has been expelled from school. Al-Yami is in prison for three months after which he will be deported forever . . ."

This scene reminiscent of such medieval classics as "Le retour de

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 166.

Martin Guerre,” or to a puritanical branded scarlet letter to publicly shame this young transgressor sent chills up the onlooker’s spine. The narrator captures this determining moment with great astuteness. He notes the reactions of the different ethnic groups and their demeanor with perceptiveness. “While Egyptians loitered in front of pie sellers, Americans were drinking *al-bārid*, cold drinks, making sure that their left hands remained on their hips . . . and wearing their dark sunshades. I was surrounded by goods and sounds of recorders, out of which came confused and discordant sounds. I could still smell charcoaled meat, and on the street I could see no women not one.”<sup>14</sup>

These low-keyed, well studied comments are the more powerful in their resonance. The comments seemingly uncalculated, are extremely powerful in their indictment.

O God help me see her face. She stood immobile not even swaying with the movements of the driven truck. While the ape-like soldier went on in his diatribes and accusations . . .<sup>15</sup> “I followed (with my eyes) the black *‘abāya*, the body trembling. alive she must be. not dead. People went about their own business. and the cars resumed their movement. and the dancers from *Alf Layla wa Layla* were back distributing the cups and the motorcades (caravans) of Shahrazad were led by young boys and *ghulmān* followed by tambourines and banners . . . and the Koreans resumed their laughter, while the Indians walked upright, and the Pakistanis smiled reflecting in their eyes the sun rays, while the elderly Afghans opened wide their mouths in bewilderment.<sup>16</sup>

These hallucinatory passages, surrealistic in their essence and narration, succeeded in giving this story its mythical dimensions. This is a narrative written with intelligence and compassion, for his sense of outrage is real and poignant but never abrasive. In his exile, he is forced to explore the cultural forces that shape his society both in his own country and in his temporarily adopted one. He came like thousands from his part of the world, and indeed all five continents, in search of presumably a better income and a hope for better living conditions for his siblings. He was to work as a translator/Arabic/English, in a sense a cultural broker, trying to bridge differences, ultimately not only between East and West, but between East and East and establish lines of communication between those “alien” nations.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 33.

Unlike the vast majority, he had come not so much to save with the intent of getting married and getting a good head start in life. He was here to satisfy the immediate needs of his sisters and mother. "I only came here for a short time. So let me be the mirror upon whose surface realities will glide."<sup>17</sup>

Since he arrived he was made acutely aware of the importance of feminine presence. "I reach out desperately for ads that portray women. Alas no women are shown in low cut dresses in spite of the hundreds of ads of Swiss watches, French perfumes, Italian furniture, British castles, and Singapore Airlines. Women I hadn't really thought about them. Yet somehow this must be the real reason why I came here. I came for the 'Lie' my father has burdened me with for one day I must immerse myself into the sea of women. I lost more than one heart, I lost a great heart, what a fool I am."<sup>18</sup> His initial resistance to viewing pornographic movies was soon overcome by his longing for women. Women are another pivotal axis within this narrative. The many women whose hearts he had broken as a young student, Amal his fellow student who took her own life in desperation. Wāḍiḥa the branded Saudi student, who takes him as a tutor since she had no right to continue in regular schools. Their fatal attraction and her subsequent tragic ending, when she is reported to have killed her seventy-year old husband and herself. Ismā'īl reads her cries for help in local newspapers when she resorted to communicating with him through "letters to the editor" asking for advice and consolation. And Aida, the love of his life, whose own tragic life and circumstances made of them star-crossed lovers. He wished himself a mirror, and a mirror as Macherey notes "... endows an object with new proportions, studies objects through other objects which are not quite the same."<sup>19</sup> The mirror, Macherey remarks elsewhere, "extends the world but it also seizes, inflates and tears that world. In the mirror the object is both completed and broken: *disjecta membra*, if the mirror constructs, it is an inversion of the movement of genesis, rather than spreading, it breaks. The images emerge from the lacerations."<sup>20</sup>

It is the lives of these "guest workers as well as the microcosm

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, 134.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 143.

they find themselves incarcerated in that Ismā'īl Khidr Mūsā attempts to reflect. "Tabouk will not sleep tonight. Three Saidis (Upper Egyptians) have killed their boss over a month ago. They cut him up in pieces and poured him into the concrete mixer, the body must have disintegrated. The crime was only discovered today. They were arrested, after which they confessed though one of them was taken to the emergency because of the torture and he lies there between life and death."

The succinct and economic matter-of-fact narration of such violence permeates this narrative. The Dantesque Inferno that is Tabouk, this "heart of darkness" where the narrator seems to emerge crying "the horror, the horror" is burdened with an awesome legacy. Tabouk was believed to have been inhabited by a tribe that was cruel and inhospitable to the Prophet. Legend has it that they had prohibited him and his armies from having access to food and especially water during his battles, it is believed that the Prophet had then put a curse on the tribe until the end of time. Their number would never exceed twenty, men, women and children, so for every newborn, one member of the tribe would die. A kind of zero population growth. "*tabūk tunsik ummak wa abūk.*" went the saying. Once there, one was made to forget all else . . . Five years are more than enough to remain in a country not yours, and here . . . it is like a big prison, yes you may be allowed to visit other people and to move around, but all remains the same, no new mornings no new evenings.<sup>21</sup> The recurring nightmares of the narrator, sometimes intermingle with his reality: "I saw myself retreating slowly, and four black men came towards me, they had bulging eyes, each eye rolling like an egg, each carrying a whip. I felt trapped, and they pushed me against a basalt wall, like a citadel, very slowly they beat me."

A scene that seems to be re-enacted in reality when towards the end of the narrative he takes a trip back to Egypt to settle some business (the money scam perpetrated by Larry and Rose-Marie), and he is indeed mugged by two men in a dark alley in Alexandria and survives miraculously their barbaric beatings.

The other nightmares and premonitions he has about this mother's death, or the fear of being caught and disgraced because of his forbidden love of Wāḍiḥa are all part of the cumulative effects that

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<sup>21</sup> 'Abd al-Majīd, 42.

make this otherwise “realistic” narrative, reverberate with mythical and archetypal dimensions. Through the mediation of the “other”, *al-Balda al-Ukhrā*, by resorting to a factitious experience, the author/narrator can only save himself from these ordeals by leaving everything and every hope of love (Aida), but presumably is redeemed by “writing” himself in the narrative. It is as if by the mediations of these “others” that he can reconcile himself with the rest of humanity. “I never thought about whether Sayyid al-Gharīb (that estranged other) was lucky . . . I only thought about how people in Tabouk, knew everything and I knew nothing.”<sup>22</sup>

If the fable seems to end with loss and dispossession on a material level, yet on a spiritual level the “demons” have been exorcised and the spirit is intact.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 83.

DR. RAMZĪ AND MR. SHARAF: ŞUN‘ALLĀH IBRĀHĪM  
AND THE DUPLICITY OF THE LITERARY FIELD<sup>1</sup>

SAMIA MEHREZ

This past January marked the end of the now expected intervals between Şun‘allāh Ibrāhīm’s past and most recent novels. *Dhāt* had appeared in May 1992 and, with the advent of 1997, Ibrāhīm’s Egyptian and Arab audiences greeted the new year with the publication of the opening chapters of his new novel *Sharaf*, serialized, in Egypt, for the first time ever in Ibrāhīm’s thirty year career as a writer, on the pages of Cairo’s weekly literary paper, *Akhbār al-Adab*.<sup>2</sup> An eventful new year indeed, for it marked a crucial change in Ibrāhīm’s politics and strategies of publication; a change which this article will read attentively as a revelatory moment in recent developments of the literary field in Egypt today, and as an instructive episode where the field’s internal structure, positions and battles are concerned.

Those among us who have followed Ibrāhīm’s publishing history know that this development had been unthinkable. It was unthinkable that Ibrāhīm’s work would appear on the pages of a state-run paper, given what he writes and the history of its reception (or lack thereof) by the state apparatus.<sup>3</sup> Whereas his first novel *Tilka al-Rā’iḥa* was published with a small publisher, requiring his financial collaboration, and was subsequently banned, his last novel, *Dhāt*, appeared through Dār al-Mustaqbal al-‘Arabī, an established leftist, Nasserist, private Egyptian publisher, with acknowledgments by the author to three lawyers “who graciously provided advice and guidance”<sup>4</sup> concerning the lethal manuscript. All the first editions of his

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was delivered at *The Colloquium on the Politics of Arab Culture in Arab Societies in an Era of Globalization*, sponsored by The Institute for Transregional Study of the Contemporary Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, Princeton University, May 9–11, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> “*Sharaf*,” *Akhbār al-Adab*, January 5–February 2, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> See my discussion of the publication history of Şun‘allāh Ibrāhīm’s novels in “Şun‘allāh Ibrāhīm and the (Hi)story of the Book,” *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction* (Cairo: The American University Press, 1994), 39–57.

<sup>4</sup> Şun‘allāh Ibrāhīm, *Dhāt* (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-‘Arabī, 1992), 5.

other works have been published outside Egypt, by Arab publishers, with the exception of *Bayrūt Bayrūt* (1984), that marked the beginning of his collaboration with Dār al-Mustaḡbal. With the publication of *Sharaf*, first in serialized form (a few opening chapters in *Akhbār al-Adab*) and subsequently the publication of the complete manuscript (March, 1997) by Egypt's reputedly liberal, state-run Dār al-Hilāl, an establishment of considerable history and intellectual weight, the impossible marriage indeed occurred. It is important to note that Ibrāhīm was courted by both *Akhbār al-Adab* and Dār al-Hilāl and that he was initially wary of their commitment. But, they both took the risk and delivered. How is it then that this new alliance is made possible? Why is it so important that we attend to it? How does it bespeak the cultural politics that govern the cultural field in Egypt today? And how does it impact on Ibrāhīm's position within it?

In an earlier article entitled "Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm's *Dhāt*: The Ultimate Objectification of the Self" I had argued that the history of the publication and reception of *Dhāt* attested to the emergence of a relative autonomy within the literary field in its relationship with that of power.<sup>5</sup> I had relied on Bourdieu as a conceptual and methodological aid, especially in his work *Les règles de l'art* (The Rules of Art) in which he looks at the emergence of an autonomous literary field (*le champ littéraire*) in nineteenth century France, focusing predominantly on the work of Gustave Flaubert as a high point in this autonomy. I had noted that the nature of the developments which had taken place within the literary field in Egypt were substantially different from those which surrounded its emergence in nineteenth century France, especially as regards the degree of their respective autonomy as well as the conditions of their respective markets. However, I did suggest that Bourdieu's theoretical framework provided an inspiring model that can be rethought and used to serve as an analytical tool for the study of the changes within the social space in modern Egypt, focusing on developments in the cultural field, in particular.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, Richard Jacquemond's forthcoming

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<sup>5</sup> I had argued that the very existence of the text *within* Egypt pointed to the fact that such autonomy was being recognized by the field of power itself, since the novel that vehemently attacked the workings of the state, its apparatus and institutions, was published without any attempts at banning or censorship.

<sup>6</sup> See *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction*, 119–146.

study on the literary field in Egypt promises to perform this increasingly complex task.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this article, in comparison to Jacquemond's study, is by far more modest and limited. It proposes to examine some of the values and dynamics within the literary field in Egypt as they become evident through a close reading of one text and one episode in the recent history of the field: Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī's laudatory editorial that accompanied the appearance of the first chapters of *Sharaf* on the pages of *Akhhbār al-Adab*. I will argue that this document is of crucial importance for it is written by one of the most influential pens in Egypt today and is published on the pages of the most widely distributed and read literary journal in the Arab region. It is of paramount importance to note that like Ibrāhīm, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī made his debut in the mid-sixties and like him again al-Ghīṭānī has risen to a different, but equally prominent position within the literary field today. However, the thirty years or so that mark the professional development of the two men, as artistic producers, and subsequently the space which each has come to inhabit within the literary field sets them apart: as Ibrāhīm continues to work in the margins, refusing to take up any material occupation other than writing, al-Ghīṭānī consolidates his public career as journalist becoming editor-in-chief of a uniquely influential journal within the field. These elements, in addition to the circumstances surrounding the publication of *Sharaf*, give occasion to explore, more fully, the Bourdieu model that I had suggested would be instrumental in understanding some of the developments in cultural life in Egypt today.

According to Bourdieu, the division of labor within the social space during the modernization process has led to the emergence of subfields of production (*sous-champ de production*) within the social space itself, each with its own history, its own values, its own internal relationships of production and its relative autonomy in face of the field of power (*le champ du pouvoir*). Among these subfields of production Bourdieu identifies the political field, the economic field, the cultural field which, in turn, is constituted of subfields: the scientific field, the artistic field, the philosophical field and the literary field. Each and every one of these subfields is a heterogeneous structure character-

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Jacquemond, *Le champ littéraire égyptien depuis 1967*, Ph.D. thesis, Université d'Aix-en-Provence, 1998.

ized by a set of constitutive objective relations that orient the battles/conflicts that seek to conserve or transform the field.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the relations of production within each of these subfields can only be understood with reference to the field of power (*le champ du pouvoir*) which, Bourdieu warns, is not to be confounded with the political field (*le champ politique*). The field of power is defined as the space where relationships of power between agents or institutions that own the necessary capital (political, economic, religious) get played out. This dynamism, within the field of power, allows the various owners of capital to occupy dominant positions in the different subfields of production thereby contaminating their values and the relationships of production within them. Hence, all subfields of production are in a dominated/subordinate position to the field of power which forever, controls their degree of autonomy. Autonomy for Bourdieu is not independence: given the existence of the field of power and its dominant position, the autonomy of the subfields is always menaced by its interventions and contamination.

As for the literary field in particular, the focus of our attention here, it acquires relative autonomy with the accumulation, over time, of symbolic capital by several successive generations. This accumulation allows the cultural producers, indeed forces them, to ignore the demands of temporal power for the sake of principles and norms internal to the literary field itself. In other words, those who enter the literary field have every interest to be disinterested.<sup>9</sup> This disinterest is what allows Bourdieu to define the literary field as an economic world in reverse where the fundamental law is internal independence vis-à-vis any external demand outside the field. The economy of praxis in the literary field is based on the inversion of the fundamental principles of the economic world. This inverted economic logic creates the social miracle of "he who loses wins."<sup>10</sup> However, the various positions of the agents within the literary field are always traversed by the values of the field of power i.e. economic or political profit. Hence there will always be internal conflict, within the field, between two principles: the heteronomous principle (agents that dominate the literary field economically or politically)

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Le champ littéraire," in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 89 (September 1991): 4.

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu, "Le champ littéraire," 6.

<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992).

and the autonomous principle (agents that distance themselves from economic or political profit).<sup>11</sup>

If Bourdieu's model remains somewhat too theoretical, I trust that Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī's editorial, significantly entitled "Sharaf Ṣun'allāh" (Ṣun'allāh's Sharaf/Honor) will, to a great extent, provide an exemplary rendition of the model.<sup>12</sup> Through its discourse on Ibrāhīm and its representation of other players in the field, the editorial will map out the relationships of production within the literary field in Egypt, the conflicting and contradictory positions within it, its contamination by various agents from the field of power (both political and economic) while developing, through its very representation of Ibrāhīm himself, a vision of the ideal literary field, the ideal internal norms and values that should govern it, and its ideal relationship with the field of power.

The very title of the editorial already bespeaks one of the most important attributes of the ideal cultural producer. The word *Sharaf* (honor) in the title of the editorial obviously performs a double role. First, *Sharaf* is a reference to the title of the new novel (also the name of the protagonist, who, like the female protagonist of Ibrāhīm's previous novel, *Dhāt* (self) is gradually emptied of that initial identity). On a second level the word *sharaf* (honor) is an attribute of the author himself: the honor of Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm. Those familiar with Ibrāhīm's demarche will take this attribute very seriously and will indeed agree that, as a cultural producer, he is Bourdieu's disinterested ideal, occupying a position of the writer most antagonistic to the field of power, and bearing a hefty badge of honor, a crucial symbolic capital that he diligently accumulated over at least thirty years within the literary field. By constructing this attribute as a positive value, however, al-Ghīṭānī, author of the editorial, produces another interesting and crucial effect: recognizing and upholding honor as a value, even when attributed to Ibrāhīm alone, makes of that value a shared symbolic capital among those who inhabit a similar position within the field. Hence it becomes a value not only bestowed on Ibrāhīm but one that is upheld by the author of the

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu, "Le champ littéraire," 6.

<sup>12</sup> Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, "Sharaf Ṣun'allāh," *Akhhār al-Adab* (January 6, 1997). All references within the article to the editorial are cited as (Al-Ghīṭānī). Translations of both, the passages within the article as well as the complete text of the editorial, are my own. The complete text of al-Ghitani's editorial is appended to this article.

article himself. Even if the two men are not close friends, even if they meet but on rare occasions, even if their respective writing careers develop in different directions (details which the editorial is keen on noting), their relationship is cemented through this positive and shared value of *sharaf*/honor.

Al-Ghīṭānī's article opens with a return to the mid-sixties, a return to the first moment that earned Ibrāhīm his badge of honor. The flashback is to *Tilka al-Rā'īha* and its eventful publication and immediate banning. The opening of the editorial positions itself at a transformative moment within the autonomy of the literary field in Egypt:

It was clear that the writer [Ibrāhīm] was challenging both unwritten and uncharted prohibitions that had settled within the writers themselves in what may be referred to as conventions. (Al-Ghīṭānī)

In this opening paragraph al-Ghīṭānī reconstructs the internal battles of the field during the mid-sixties. Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm, as well as other new agents, among them al-Ghīṭānī himself, were engaged in a battle/conflict not simply with the political authorities, as we have all grown accustomed to represent it, but with other participants within the field itself, other writers who had settled into certain conventions. It is by reading these lines as a description of a transformative moment that we can reread many of the lashing comments that the writers of the sixties received at that moment in time. It is only natural therefore for earlier agents within the field, who have acceded to various dominant positions, guardians and propagators of certain symbolic values, to combat the new arrivals, in the following terms:

This young generation that does not read (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn), that does not study (Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal), that does not seek depth (Aḥmad Bahā' al-Dīn), this generation of bureaucrats that does not know its own classics, nor the classics of others, what will it write?<sup>13</sup>

The dominant symbolic values of the mid-sixties are more than clear as enumerated above: heritage, education, world classics, high culture, etc. The new agents represent the absence/lack or even inverse of those symbolic values. More seriously these new agents seem to bring into the field values that are alien to it: "they" are bureaucrats, "we" are not! The relationship between these two positions

<sup>13</sup> Nada Tomiche, *Histoire de la littérature romanesque de l'Égypte moderne* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1981), 130.

was, and had to be, antagonistic, for the literary field is not a fan club, it is not a charity home but a battle field of forces acting on the participants, in various ways, depending on the position they occupy within it.

When *Tilka al-Rā'īha* first appears it is banned by the political authorities, for political reasons (Ibrāhīm's political *not* creative past). However, it is also lashed at from within the literary field itself. The late Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī's well-known attack on the novel makes much more sense when understood as a battle over competing values that tend to conserve (Ḥaqqī's position) or transform (Ibrāhīm's intervention) the literary field.<sup>14</sup> As al-Ghīṭānī notes, Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm's work contributes to a change of the dominant language rendering it "neutral" and "devoid of ornamentation or excess." In the editorial, *Tilka al-Rā'īha* is deemed "a mark of considerable creative courage" (notice *creative* not political), it marks "the beginning of a new trend in the development of the Arabic novel." However, Ḥaqqī's evaluation of the novel was negative: it is vulgar, foolish, with a flawed sensibility and without taste.

Al-Ghīṭānī's editorial will reveal new battles over values within the field today. By providing the reader with a profile of Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm, al-Ghīṭānī will in effect provide a list of the ideal symbolic values within an ideal literary field and will proceed to pit them against other values, negatively represented within the article. Of Ibrāhīm al-Ghīṭānī writes:

Ṣun'allāh's career can be summed up in two words: dedication and asceticism. Ṣun'allāh's dedication to literature is unparalleled: he has devoted his entire life to literature abandoning every other work or job that he had occupied. He has lived at a minimal level of subsistence that would ensure continuation. . . . He applied himself to reading and writing in his small apartment in Heliopolis (. . .) living with his small family in isolation, rarely appearing in the cultural events that crowd Cairo. (Al-Ghīṭānī)

Ibrāhīm's life, as constructed in this passage, is indeed a direct application of Bourdieu's definition of the literary field as an economic world in reverse: he acquires value within the field by adopting ones that are in direct opposition to those within the economic world. He seeks no material gain, an ascetic who contents himself with a min-

<sup>14</sup> See "Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm and the (Hi)story of the Book," in *Egyptian Writers*, 39–57.

imal level of subsistence; he lives in a small apartment in Heliopolis on the sixth floor (and may I add with no elevator); he has renounced any form of material occupation or job; he lives in isolation not seeking the spotlights, connections, etc. that may enhance his position. All this for the sake of “continuation” (of creative production) and “dedication to literature.” In the economic world Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm is certainly a loser, but within the literary field, Bourdieu would argue, “he who loses wins.” And he is obviously recognized as a winner and is admired, perhaps also envied for this “unparalleled” position. Despite Ibrāhīm’s “isolation” al-Ghīṭānī tells us:

Ṣun‘allāh is forever sought out by every Arab writer, every Arabist who arrives in Egypt. He receives many invitations to world famous universities and international conferences . . . (Al-Ghīṭānī)

This international recognition is directly related to the position Ibrāhīm occupies within the field, the symbolic value that he has accumulated over thirty years and his awareness as a cultural producer of the necessity of ignoring the demands of temporal power for the sake of principles and norms internal to the field itself. It is Ibrāhīm’s complete disinterest that brings him so close to the figure of the prophet in Bourdieu’s model: as a writer he adopts a similar attitude from the “worldly” and the “profane” (economic or political profit).<sup>15</sup> And indeed, al-Ghīṭānī’s further rendition of Ibrāhīm, on the pages of *Akhhbār al-Adab*, envelopes him in the garbs of a prophet:

During my travels with him I have learned to appreciate his simplicity in everything and his contentment with the available, the possible, be that with regard to food or accommodation; I have learned to appreciate his humor and sarcasm despite his visible depression and his hidden grief. (Al-Ghīṭānī)

In 1994 both Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm and Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī were invited to attend a conference on Arabic Literature in Tunisia, organized by the UNESCO. The organizers had imposed the presence of an Israeli writer during that event, an act that produced various reactions among the Arab writers present. The editorial is critical of the nature of the positions taken by two Arab writers who had attended and turns to Ibrāhīm’s reaction during the event as a model, once more endowing him with prophetic qualities:

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<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu, “Le champ littéraire,” 6.

Şun‘allāh’s position was clear and firm, unblemished by any considerations that seek to court a prize, or an authority in France, or a ministry in the United States, or a university in England. Şun‘allāh defended the values of Arab culture and the principles of national identity to which adhering has become a matter of sarcasm for some. (Al-Ghīṭānī)

It is obvious here that Ibrāhīm is constructed as the autonomous writer par excellence. Not only is his life a model of the inverted economic world but it is also one that combats and distances itself from the field of power (*le champ du pouvoir*) in general, a distance that safeguards his symbolic value from the owners of capital: political, economic and cultural. This construction by al-Ghīṭānī of a prophet-like writer, autonomous in every way is “unparalleled,” as he himself notes in his editorial. However, the author of the editorial will use this exceptional case to combat other positions and other values, those of “the market and business world,” of “traffickers” and “mercenaries” that are “creeping into our literary and cultural life.” It is important to recall that al-Ghīṭānī constructs the values and positions within the literary field from the vantage point of *his* position which, we must be aware, is a very powerful one. Herein lie the importance of this document and the necessity of understanding all its ramifications, as well as its double discourse.

Al-Ghīṭānī is conscious of both his double discourse and his implied readers: there are those for whom the article addresses general values and ethics (the general readership) and there are others, from within the field, for whom these seemingly general values can be decoded on a far more particular level. Those of us who live in close proximity to the “triangle of horror” (to use Şun‘allāh Ibrāhīm’s description of the dens of Egyptian intellectuals in downtown Cairo: Sulayman Pasha Street, *Zahrat al-Bustān* coffeeshop and the *Cairo Atelier*) had been following a series of debates prior to the appearance of *Sharaf* on the pages of *al-Adab*. In order to decode al-Ghīṭānī’s double discourse we need to review some of these debates. I will therefore take a moment to explain what might appear to be a missing link in the editorial.

Two important events need to be brought to the fore: this past November (1997) Ibrāhīm ‘Abd al-Majīd, author of several important novels and a late comer to the field (even though quite close to al-Ghīṭānī’s age bracket, he published his first short stories in the early seventies) had been invited to the United States to attend the

MESA (Middle East Studies Association) conference. Upon his return ‘Abd al-Majīd published an article in the Nasserist paper *Al-‘Arabī* with the “blasphemous” title “Amrīkā Umm al-Dunyā” (America Mother of the World) in which he reviewed some of the phenomena that impressed him during his stay in the United States.<sup>16</sup> This was followed, in December, by yet another event that further stigmatized ‘Abd al-Majīd: the names of the recipients of the *Naguīb Mahfouz Literary Award*, sponsored by the American University in Cairo, were announced. They were two: the late Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt for her novel *Al-Bāb al-Maftūh*, 1960 (The Open Door) and Ibrāhīm ‘Abd al-Majīd for his novel *Al-Balda al-Ukhrā*, 1991 (The Other Country). The two winners received a symbolic honorarium and their respective works are currently being translated into English, to be published by the American University Press. It is perhaps important to note here that the prize received by ‘Abd al-Majīd was initially destined to Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm who, in perfect keeping with his image, refused it.

For several weeks, I imagine Ibrāhīm ‘Abd al-Majīd did not sleep. His article in *Al-‘Arabī*, the American University Award and the prospective translation of his work by its press, all became a public debate on the pages of *Akhhbār al-Adab* culminating in a short reply, by ‘Abd al-Majīd, in the same paper, a piece that sums up both the accusations hailed upon him and his rather timid defence:

I followed, with attention, what my friend the critic Dr. Sayyid al-Baḥrāwī wrote concerning the *Naguīb Mahfouz Literary Award* sponsored by the American University in Cairo.

(...)

Dr. Sayyid’s second article about the prize suggests that the prize is an indication of dependency, among other things and considers my article, that was published in *Al-‘Arabī* about my trip to America, further confirmation of that. I would like to clarify that my article expressed admiration for some of the characteristics of American life; this does not mean admiration for American policy; both my opinion and position on the latter are known, the article itself includes direct passages that address this issue.

(...)

Accepting a prize from the American University does not mean conceding to American politics. After all the prize does bear the name of

<sup>16</sup> Ibrāhīm ‘Abd al-Majīd, “Amrīkā Umm al-Dunyā,” *Al-‘Arabī* (December 23, 1997).

Naguib Mahfouz and the university counts many respected Egyptians and other nationals among its faculty, whose patriotic positions are well known.

(. . .)

The title of my article was about freedom, time, public opinion, but the editor in *Al-ʿArabī* chose the title “America Mother of the World” perhaps for the sake of sensationalism, not more.

(. . .)

Finally, to move from one trench to another, Dr. Sayyid, is not such a simple matter. I wish to assure you that our trench is solid and unshakable.<sup>17</sup> (my translation)

ʿAbd al-Majīd’s defence merits a study all to itself, however, this is not the purpose of my paper. What I would like to draw attention to, in general, is the fact that ʿAbd al-Majīd’s reply actually introduces (quite hesitantly and timidly) certain values that collide with some of the more generally accepted ones within the field: looking to the other (an Imperial Other), seeking “global” attention (prizes, translations, conferences), etc. In al-Ghīṭānī’s representation of the literary field, ʿAbd al-Majīd will find himself in close quarters with the other two Arab writers, involved at the conference in Tunisia in 1994, whose values (as described by al-Ghīṭānī) seem to be closer to ʿAbd al-Majīd’s than to Ibrāhīm’s or his own, for that matter. The battle of “us” against “them” is relaunched through the disinterested image of Ibrāhīm:

[Ṣunʿallāh] receives many invitations to world famous universities and international conferences some of which he accepts without seeking to promote his image or boast about himself and the hospitality he received to the exhausted, worn out reader, even though Ṣunʿallāh is well deserving of recognition.

(. . .)

It [*Sharaf*] is perhaps a hot beginning for nineteen ninety seven, one that confirms the firm stability of beautiful creative values in face of mushrooming phenomena in our literary life that warn of alarming corruption and the widespread fickle and facile values of traffickers (*tuggār shantā*). The same values we have come to know in the market and business world are creeping into our literary and cultural life, but here is not the place to expand on this. (Al-Ghīṭānī)

But what happens to the disinterested writer when he decides to become interested? In what does he become interested? And is it all

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<sup>17</sup> *Akhbār al-Adab* (January 12, 1997).

worth his interest? What is the fate that awaits “Sharaf Ṣun‘allāh,” to use al-Ghīṭānī’s editorial title? Here I wish to return to the opening of this article to examine two crucial points: Ibrāhīm’s motifs in publishing with both *Akhhbār al-Adab* and *Dār al-Hilāl*, and the implications of his decision on his position as a disinterested writer.

One of the most crucial elements in Bourdieu’s theory concerning the literary field, in particular, is his attention to the economic praxis within the field itself. After having described the literary field as an economic world in reverse he is quick to add:

... this does not mean that there is no economic logic to this economics of charisma that is based on a sort of social miracle. . . .

(. . .)

Within this logic one would have to analyse the relationship between writers or artists and their publishers or their gallerists. These double personas. . . . must possess essentially contradictory dispositions: economic ones that are for some sectors of the field, quite alien to the producers and intellectual dispositions close enough to those of the producers whose work they can only exploit if they know how to appreciate and endow it with value.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship that had bound Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm to his earlier publishers especially perhaps his Egyptian, private publisher *Dār al-Mustaqbal al-‘Arabī* was one premised on much of Bourdieu’s analysis. I will focus particularly on *Dār al-Mustaqbal* with which Ibrāhīm has had a long history and which actually features in his acknowledgments at the end of the *Dār al-Hilāl* edition of *Sharaf*. In my article “Ṣun‘allāh Ibrāhīm’s *Dhāt*” I had already tried to suggest the importance of the relationship between author and publisher, noting in my description of their alliance, the centrality of their close intellectual/ideological dispositions:

It is no coincidence that *Dhāt*, like *Bayrūt Bayrūt*, should be published by *Dār Al-Mustaqbal Al-‘Arabī* (a leftist, Nasserist publisher) and not *Dār al-Shurūq* for example (an Islamist, commercial, conservative publisher).

(. . .)

The text opens with the author’s list of acknowledgments that . . . ends with the names of three lawyers. . . . This page is followed by the publisher’s intervention, which inscribes the essence of the lawyers’ guidance and advice.

(. . .)

<sup>18</sup> Bourdieu, “Le champ littéraire,” 6.

[these] interventions point to the position both author and publisher occupy within the literary field. This is not the story of the minor employee, Alā' Hāmid, who published a mediocre manuscript at his own expense. This is the story of a distinguished professional writer (and perhaps he is the only one we have) who enters into an alliance with one of Egypt's important publishing houses, headed by Muḥammad Faiyq, a former Nasser-era minister of information and the man who currently presides over the Human Rights Organization in Egypt.<sup>19</sup>

The risk-taking on both sides of the alliance pays off: not only do author and publisher reap symbolic profit (rave reviews and articles) but, as Bourdieu suggests, they are able to transform this symbolic profit into an economic one (*Dhāt* enters into a second edition within six months of releasing the first one).

It is at this high point of his career, at this prophet-like, untouchable position that Ibrāhīm is courted by both *Akḥbār al-Adab* and *Dār al-Hilāl* whose positions within the field are certainly contaminated by the field of power. To the great dismay of *Dār al-Mustaqbal*, Ibrāhīm enters into a new alliance, a partnership that essentially represents a rupture with the autonomous praxis described by Bourdieu. There are obvious reasons why this alliance of opposites should be possible at this particular historical juncture, reasons that will force us to read the field of power (*le champ du pouvoir*) as being itself a dynamic and heterogeneous structure, like all other subfields of production which it dominates. I will return to this point later on in the article.

With the release on the pages of *Akḥbār al-Adab* of the first chapters of *Sharaf* all hell broke loose. The few chapters that had been published begin to tell the story of Sharaf (Ashraf 'Abd al-'Azīz Sulaymān), born in 1974 to a middle class family whose existence is deformed by the alarming privatization policies and the myth of globalization. Throughout the text Sharaf monologues, dreams and thinks in imported trademarks and designer labels pitting them against possible local "options" whether that concerns food, clothes, accessories or cigarettes. He is a drop-out and like millions of his generation roams the streets of downtown Cairo, with empty pockets and on an empty stomach, feeding on the glittering world that Cairo boutiques, movie theatres, fast food stands and women (local and

<sup>19</sup> See "Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm's *Dhāt*: The Ultimate Objectification of the Self," in *Egyptian Writers*, 130.

foreign) may have to offer the hungry eye. The first chapter is set in downtown Cairo with Sharaf's back ironically turned to the statue of Ṭal'at Ḥarb. Sharaf meets John, from Australia, in front of a movie theatre. After Sharaf accepts his invitation to the movie, John takes him home, tries to seduce and attempts to rape him. Struggling to live up to his name, or rather in defence of it, Sharaf murders John and ends up in prison. Sharaf's prison world is a mirror image of the outside world divided into haves and have nots, with bribes and tips to pay for every meal, and every move he, and others, make in jail. Thus begins Sharaf's journey and Sharaf's problems.

Rumors circulated within the literary milieu to the effect that Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm had plagiarized from another work. Soon, *Al-'Arabī* published a brief article that confirmed the rumors:

Writer Fathī Faḍl Accuses: *Sharaf* Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm is Copied from *The Cell*

Novelist Fathī Faḍl is now preparing to sue novelist Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm and will appeal to the Writers' Union to strip the latter of his membership.

(...)

This has triggered an enormous amount of surprise and disbelief in the literary and cultural milieus given the alleged accusation against a writer of Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm's stature. According to Fathī Faḍl, the plagiarism concerns the content, setting, timeframe, protagonist, events and characters, besides 42 paragraphs copied, verbatim, from the original novel, *The Cell*, without any acknowledgment.<sup>20</sup>

But the question remains, who is Fathī Faḍl anyway? In my article on *Dhāt* I had suggested that Ibrāhīm's history and position within the literary field played an important role in the smooth publication of his critical novel. "This is not the story of Alā' Ḥāmid," I had said. But, here we were: after the publication of the first chapters in *Akhhbār al-Adab*, Ibrāhīm's story was fated to be muddled up with Alā' Ḥāmid. Fathī Faḍl (owner of a printshop) was the third party sentenced to eight years imprisonment in December 1991, along with Alā' Ḥāmid (virtually unknown writer, author of a novel deemed "blasphemous" by Al-Azhar) and Madbūlī (Cairo's most renowned bookstore owner). Faḍl had spent forty days in prison; he recorded

<sup>20</sup> *Al-'Arabī* (January 20, 1997).

his memoirs of that experience in *The Cell*, the alleged “original novel” from which *Sharaf* had been copied.

Despite Şun‘allāh Ibrāhīm’s “stature,” he found himself involved in what appeared to be a literary/ethical scandal that quickly took on tabloid dimensions; a scandal very different from that which, thirty years ago, had greeted *Tilka al-Rā’iḥa* and had earned him the badge of honor (*sharaf*), bestowed upon him only two weeks earlier by al-Ghīṭānī, in his editorial. The give and take between plaintive and accused on the pages of several Egyptian papers, together with the rumors circulating in the “triangle of horror” not to mention those elaborated beyond such borders (Ibrāhīm had told me then, that *Al Hayā al-Jadīda*, a Palestinian paper in Ramallah, had published an article claiming that he had offered to publish *Sharaf* with Faḍl as co-author!), all this called for a serious investigation of the case.

Wā’il ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ of *Rōz al-Yūsif* produced a reasonable report entitled: “*Sharaf Şun‘allāh Ibrāhīm fil-Ẓinzāna*” (Şun‘allāh Ibrāhīm’s *Sharaf*/honor in *The Cell*).<sup>21</sup> The badge of honor was now in question, on trial. Ibrāhīm’s very credibility as a writer, suddenly erupted; his laudatory history, as constructed by al-Ghīṭānī, was transformed into a series of accusations which the *Rōz al-Yūsif* article reports: “He has earned more than what he deserves,” “the Egyptian Left made him a star.” Evidently, the accusations stab exactly where expected: all are directed towards his “unparalleled” position within the field as avant-garde, autonomous and disinterested.

In an interview with Şun‘allāh Ibrāhīm after the publication of *Sharaf*, I probed him on the reasons why he opted for publication with two state-run outfits. His response was revelatory, in so far as it recognized the field of power as a dynamic, heterogeneous structure which *does* in turn impact on his autonomous, disinterested position. Ibrāhīm basically argued (and here I am paraphrasing him) that even if *Akhbār al-Adab* and *Dār al-Hilāl* held heteronomous positions within the literary field they still had within them elements with whom he was willing to collaborate (Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, editor-in-chief of *Akhbār al-Adab* and Muṣṭafā Nabīl, editor-in-chief of the well established *Riwāyat al-Hilāl* both of whom solicited Ibrāhīm’s manuscript, both fully aware of the potentially explosive nature of his work and both of whom delivered as promised). However, the existence of such

<sup>21</sup> *Rōz al-Yūsif* (January 27, 1997).

“risk-taking” elements in heteronomous positions within the field is a recent development, immediately related to the new born alliance between the State and the Egyptian Liberals and Leftists in its attempt to contain the Islamist position within the social sphere.<sup>22</sup> This is obviously an interesting shift in the field of power: given its own dynamism and heterogeneity, today it is willing not only to recognize some of the values which characterize Ibrāhīm’s position, but to actually adopt them itself, through its domination/contamination of the literary field. Al-Ghīṭānī’s editorial in *Akhhbār al-Adab* therefore at once constructs the values of Ibrāhīm himself as well as those of the institution that publishes him; a kind of rapprochement of values that is certainly in the interest of the field of power that dominates the literary field. What we may have considered to be contradictory positions all of a sudden come to look alike. But this is just one side of the coin.

In entering this new alliance with state-run institutions, Ibrāhīm cannot himself escape the look-alike aspect of this new position. As these institutions hope for his values to rub off on them, theirs will inevitably rub off on him. One of the most attractive prospects of Ibrāhīm’s new alliance with *Akhhbār al-Adab* and Dār al-Hilāl was their market, their distribution and their readership. The former is reputed to publish an estimated ten thousand copies while the latter publishes five thousand copies and both distribute on a regional level. These figures (whose exact accuracy cannot be ascertained, since both outfits deal with distribution figures as if they were military secrets) cannot be compared to the three thousand copies that take years to sell with a private publisher. Beyond this, working with both *Akhhbār al-Adab* and Dār al-Hilāl seemed to provide Ibrāhīm with both symbolic and economic profit. *Akhhbār al-Adab* sells for P.T. 50 and can certainly ensure the symbolic profit for *Sharaf* (a series of five chapters that become a kind of sample for a large public). As for the *Dār al-Hilāl* edition, it is sold at L.E. 8.50 (compared to L.E. 1.50 until recently) with 12.5% of the sales to the author. Certainly not a fortune, but an economic profit nonetheless.

However, all these calculations enforce the rules of the economic world, a world whose values are a direct inverse of the economics

<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed reading of this issue see Richard Jacquemond, “Quelques débats récents autour de la censure,” *Egypte/Monde Arabe*, 20 (4e trimestre 1994): 25–41.

of charisma within which Ibrāhīm's autonomous position had been shaped and consolidated. No longer is this the social miracle of "he who loses wins" rather this new alliance, these new values come to confirm that within the literary field "he who wins loses." As soon as Ibrāhīm seeks to win the market, adopting its logic and values, he has to succumb to and is also measured by those same values.

Anyone familiar with Ibrāhīm's work knows that the document, or the docu-fictional element is an integral part of his work. In fact, it is precisely his original use of documents that has set him apart from all other writers and has earned him his role of "leadership" in developing one of the trends in the modern Arabic novel. Ever since his second work, *Al-Lajna*, 1981 (The Committee) Ibrāhīm has always relied on external documentary sources that become an integral part of the very structure of his fictional work. *Sharaf*, of course, is no exception. In all instances the author has provided a long list of sources and acknowledgements at the end of each work. His publishers (and this is indeed an important factor) have always diligently reproduced these pages. In the case of *Akhbār al-Adab*, however, the logic of the serial, (itself a commercial logic) into which both Ibrāhīm and the paper are interlocked does not take heed of such ethical/literary considerations that are quite alien to the values of the market (especially an unregulated one as is the case in Egypt). For the first time ever Ibrāhīm commits an oversight: the chapters, which *do* draw on some of the details in Fathī Faḍl's description of his prison experience are published without acknowledgements (even though these appear later in al-Hilāl's edition of *Sharaf* with a host of other acknowledgements to a handful of authors and sources). But is it an oversight? Or is it a confirmation of the fact that indeed the praxis of the economic world dominated the entire episode of publication. In either case, the commercial, serial introduction of *Sharaf* in the literary field allowed a quasi-anonymous element (Fathī Faḍl) to be identified, in the papers, as a "novelist" (when he is not) on par with no other but Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm himself. In short, Fathī Faḍl gains symbolic profit at the expense of Ibrāhīm's accumulated symbolic value and is quoted as having said, at the peak of the entire episode "I am living the happiest days of my life". Ibrāhīm's reaction was equally telling: "I discovered that I have no friends [within the field]," he said, over the phone.

The irony in all this remains that the novel itself seems to be foretelling much of the circumstances that surrounded its publication.

As I had said earlier, the chapters published in *Akhbār al-Adab* introduced the reader to Sharaf's ordeals in captivity. With the complete *Dār al-Hilāl* edition the readers continued this journey inside Egyptian prisons. We move from the 'Anbar Mīrī (regular/public ward), for the havenots of the prison world, to the 'Anbar Malakī (regal/private ward) for the affluent prisoners. Those who are acquitted from the former are those who can afford to pay for the latter. In both wards, the reader is introduced to a phenomenal number of prisoners with crime cases ranging from petty theft, murder, violence, to more serious crimes of corruption at every level: construction, food, medicine, espionage, etc. All of the characters portrayed in the novel are based on documental material that the author "fictionalizes" and integrates into the larger world of the prison that he creates with amazing detail and ability.

Within captivity Sharaf acquires a narrative voice that will alternate with that of the omniscient presence in narrating the nineteen chapters of the novel. The omniscient narrator in *Sharaf* resembles, to a great extent, the satiric presence that puppeteers the characters' lives in *Dhāt*. Again like Dhāt, Sharaf's voice is contained, constrained, limited and naive rendering him a chronic recipient of others' actions, a young man who carries a name too big for him, a premonition that is fulfilled at the end of the novel when he consciously and quietly agrees to shave his body hair, with an Israeli-made blade, in preparation for a homosexual relationship with another prisoner.

After a period of long hardship in the Regular Ward, Sharaf is finally transferred to the Private Ward when his mother's short, unwelcome but necessary visits, with her modest, local provisions, allow for such a move. In the Private ward Sharaf's social and economic stature again places him at a disadvantage. He circulates, within the prison, in a world beyond his means, populated by ambassadors, fat cats, doctors, smugglers, etc. He quickly occupies a position similar to that he had occupied outside of the prison: the closest one in the ward to the bucket of urine.

In the Private Ward, Sharaf encounters his counterpoint in the novel: Dr. Ramzī Boutros Nāṣīf. Dr. Ramzī is, on all levels, Sharaf's other. He is of a middle class Coptic family, a successful graduate of pharmacology, a witness to the grand national dreams of the fifties and early sixties, a patriot and Nasserist, despite his father's depressive attitude towards that. He is both cultured and progressive, a

successful professional and a critical mind. He is a man of the world, travelling in the Middle East, Europe, Latin America and back; a multinational, corporate executive with an Achilles heal: his ambitions for the Third World, his critique of multinationals and his extreme awareness of the politics of globalization, especially as they impact on Third World economies, societies and general welfare. When he tries to take on the evils of multinationals alone, he is framed by his colleagues, in a fabricated bribery case, and ends up in jail.

Dr. Ramzī's character occupies a substantial space in the novel splitting it down the middle. However, this space will recede when he is placed inside a solitary cell towards the end. A whole section is set apart for the newspaper clippings which he carefully collects and hides in a plastic bag in prison. These clippings represent his continued preoccupation with the corruption in the outside world at both a national and global level. Eventually, with the collaboration of Sharaf, the prison authorities seize this little treasure along with a lengthy self-defence that Ramzī himself had prepared, in anticipation of his own trial.

The draft of the self-defence is an impressive, encyclopedic piece of research which Ibrāhīm weaves from an amazing number of sources and documents all listed and acknowledged on the last page of the novel. From these documents, Ibrāhīm constructs Ramzī Boutros Naṣīf's life-account, presented to the reader in another first-person pronoun that becomes a counterpoint to Sharaf's. This self-defence, however, turns into an obsessive dismantling and critique of multinationals and globalization.

From the start, Dr. Ramzī has a grain of the saviour about him: as a student he believed in free medicine for all, as a corporate manager he worked against the ideologies and policies of the multinationals that employed him. Even as a prisoner he constantly advised fellow prisoners on what to eat and what not to. In his sincere mission to enlighten and save, he writes and directs a subversive puppet show for the prisoners. In it he attempts to recanvass all the network of relations that bind the United States with Israel with the multinationals with globalization with corruption with injustice, etc. Ignorant of its contents, the prison authorities allow Dr. Ramzī to stage his show in celebration of the Sixth of October Victory. At the end, the entire event is transformed into a riot. The prison authorities take matters in control, penalize the prisoners and lock

up Dr. Ramzī in solitary confinement. Dr. Ramzī spends the rest of his existence on the pages of the novel yelling proclamations from his solitary confinement to awaken his fellow prisoners and incite them to rebel, to no avail. Ramzī's appeals are met with total disinterest and contempt. *Sharaf* closes with Dr. Ramzī alone in his cell, unheeded and unheard as Sharaf stands under the shower, shaving his body hair.

Ibrāhīm's readers will find themselves quite familiar with Dr. Ramzī's character. He is a *déjà vu*, much like the protagonists in *Tilka al-Rā'ihā*, *Al-Lajna*, *Najmat Aghustus*, *Bayrūt Bayrūt*, and even *Dhāt* (Ibrāhīm's only female protagonist who locks herself up in her bathroom and cries, sitting on the toilet seat). They are all the self against the world; the self oppressed, disillusioned, defeated, alone, unheard, and crushed. But who is Sharaf? Sharaf who commits the very act that has for long obsessed most of Ibrāhīm's narratives without ever being confirmed or fulfilled?

In my earlier article on *Dhāt* I had argued that Ibrāhīm's use of both an omniscient narrator and a female protagonist, for the first time ever in his novels, had allowed him to achieve "the ultimate objectification of the self."<sup>23</sup> In *Sharaf*, again for the first time, Ibrāhīm uses two first-person narrators: Sharaf (too small for his name) and Ramzī (too big for the world); two selves that see, narrate and occupy the world of the prison quite differently. Can one now ask: is this doubling of the "I" in the text, with such totally antagonistic positions, a sign of the self, divided?

#### APPENDIX

Translation of Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī's Editorial "Sharaf Ṣun'allāh" (Ṣun'allāh's Honor), *Akhbār al-Adab*, Sunday, January 5, 1997.

The appearance of *Tilka al-Rā'ihā* and its immediate banning during the sixties was certainly eventful on all levels. It marked the beginning of a new trend in the development of the Arabic novel that is deservedly led today by Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm; a trend that assimilates modern narrative techniques and a new neutral language devoid

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of this point see my article "Ṣun'allāh Ibrāhīm's *Dhāt*," in *Egyptian Writers*, 39–57.

of ornamentation or excess. It was clear then that the writer was challenging both unwritten and uncharted prohibitions that had settled within the writers themselves, in what may be referred to as conventions (*urf*). Even though the issues raised by *Tilka al-Rā'īha* may now be considered quite modest in comparison to the writings, in recent years, of the younger generation that continue to challenge prohibitions and dominant positions, still by all measures of its time *Tilka al-Rā'īha* was certainly a mark of considerable creative courage.

Thirty years is the distance that separates the appearance of *Tilka al-Rā'īha* and the publication, on the pages of *Akhbār al-Adab*, of the first chapters of Şun'allāh's latest novel, *Sharaf* which he has just completed three weeks ago. Thirty years filled with the publication of important works that are today considered milestones in the history of the Arabic novel: *Najmat Aghustus*, *Bayrūt Bayrūt* and *Dhāt*.

The two most important features that characterize Şun'allāh's career can be summed up in two words: dedication and asceticism. Şun'allāh's dedication to literature is unparalleled: he has devoted his entire life to literature abandoning every other work or job that he had occupied. He has lived at a minimal level of subsistence that would ensure continuation, without the ambitions that have contained/constrained numerous forms of expression and ultimately destroyed great talents, transforming some individuals of our generation into traffickers and mercenaries. He applied himself to reading and writing in his small apartment, on the sixth floor in Heliopolis, keeping himself abreast of international cultural developments through his command of the English language, living with his small family in isolation, rarely appearing in the cultural events that crowd Cairo. Despite this, however, Şun'allāh is forever sought out by every Arab writer, every Arab who arrives in Egypt. He receives many invitations to world famous universities and international conferences some of which he accepts without ever seeking to promote his image, or boast about himself and the recognition he received to the exhausted, worn out reader, even though Şun'allāh is well deserving of recognition. He has never once appeared on Egyptian television, I think he has never sought to. However, I believe that this failing on the part of the media is an error that should be corrected.

Twice we travelled together: once to Algeria in 1987 and once to Tunisia in 1994 to a conference sponsored by the UNESCO during which I witnessed confrontations between the representatives of the UNESCO who wanted to impose an Israeli writer within a conference on Arabic literature, and between the late Emile Habibi

whose loud positions in recent years have been quite disturbing for his admirers and Adonis who has an eye on the Nobel Prize. Şun'al-lāh's position was clear and firm, unblemished by any considerations that seek to court a prize, or an authority in France, or a ministry in the United States, or a university in England. Şun'allāh defended the values of Arab culture and the principles of national identity to which adhering has become the butt of sarcasm for some. Şun'al-lāh has a vision and a position that rejects the status quo in pursuit of a better future and in this he is passionate.

*Sharaf* is perhaps his *chef d'oeuvre* where he represents a whole age towards which he feels total estrangement; an estrangement that he audaciously and astutely expresses artistically and novelistically. He does so with techniques that characterize his work alone, especially the documentary level which he transforms into pure creative energy, replete with black humor.

This novel will cause numerous debates and contradictory reactions, but I must say that it is the essence of an age and the vision of a great creative writer who molded it with power. It is perhaps a hot beginning for nineteen ninety-seven, one that confirms the firm stability of beautiful creative values in face of mushrooming phenomena in our literary life that warn of alarming corruption and the widespread fickle and facile values of traffickers. The same values we have come to know in the market and business world are creeping into our literary and cultural life, but here is not the place to expand on this. Hence the appearance of a new literary work by an established writer like Şun'allāh can only bring forth optimism and confidence and an incitement for creativity.

Unfortunately, I have never been very close to Şun'allāh; we seldom meet, we call each other up sometimes. During my travels with him I have learned to appreciate his simplicity in everything and his contentment with the available, and the possible, be that with regard to food or accommodation. I have learned to appreciate his humor and sarcasm despite his visible depression and his hidden grief.

Şun'allāh's literary experience is naturally different from my own in both its orientations and its techniques, for this is the essence of creative work. He remains one of the few for whom I consider the appearance of a new work an event that merits attention and contemplation. What characterizes my relationship with Şun'allāh is the great respect that I have towards such a great writer whose work we are proud to present on the pages of *Akhhār al-Adab*. It is indeed an auspicious beginning for the new year.

## VISUAL THINKING AND THE ARAB SEMANTIC MEMORY

KAMAL BOULLATA

The Cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredients of perception itself . . . There is no basic difference in this respect between what happens when a person looks at the world directly and when he sits with his eyes closed and “thinks”.

Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere I addressed the question of Arabic characteristics of visual expression and explored the structural stratifications in Arabic and in Islamic art.<sup>2</sup> I argued that structural stratifications intrinsic to the Semitic prototypes which govern Arabic grammar were correlated with the geometric network regulating patterns of arabesques manifested in Islamic art.

In this paper, I shall examine the terms in the language which are related to visuality in an attempt to explain how the “aesthetic of concept” and the “aesthetic typology” in Islamic art may be traced in signs belonging to Arabic. Specifically, I will explore the relative scarcity of conceptual definitions as opposed to the very abundant supply of perceptual definitions. On the one hand there are the many terms that describe the visual world of the desert while, on the other, tremendous ambiguity in terms specifying visual perception. The

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<sup>1</sup> In his book, *Visual Thinking*, Rudolf Arnheim asserts that the ancient dichotomy between seeing and thinking, between perceiving and reasoning is false and misleading. Our perceptual responses to the visual world are the basic means by which we structure events, and from which we derive our ideas and therefore language. See Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977). The term “semantic memory” is borrowed from studies focusing on the retrieval mechanism involved in the storage of words. Both names and the attributes of objects that we know are believed to be stored in our “semantic memory.” See W. Noordman-Vonk, *Retrieval from Semantic Memory* (Berlin, New York, Springer-Verlag, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> “Fī Handasat al-Lugha wa Qawā'id al-Raqsh” (On the Patterns of Arabic and the Grammar of Arabesque), in *al-Islām wa l-Hadātha*, Adonis, M. Arkoun, et al. (London, al-Saqi, 1990), 17–37. The study also appeared in a Spanish translation as “Geometría de la lengua y gramática de la geometría” in *Cuadernos de la Alhambra*, Vol. 27 (Grenada, 1991), 11–26.

contrast found in these two extremes will reveal how the preserved Arabic lexicon is one key to the understanding of the language's formative components in conceptualizing visual perception.<sup>3</sup>

### ARABIC AND THE VISUAL WORLD

Classical Arabic as it is known today was already an elevated system of speech that had been perfected centuries before the advent of Islam. However, the revelation of an Arabic *Qur'ān* [literally recitation] was the single most significant factor preserving the prototypical form of the Arabic language. As a result of the sacred role ascribed to the language since 622 A.D., we are able today to procure access to its primeval state.

Following the spread of Islam, many early Muslim scholars became obsessed with maintaining the prototypical form of the language. To save the language from extraneous corruption, the scholars identified the nomad Arab as the final arbiter of the language's purity. "The deeper an Arab lived in the desert," a proverb prescribed, "The more eloquent his language."<sup>4</sup> Over the centuries, no matter what shores Arabic reached, the nomad's desert was not merely the barren place where the language was first spoken. Rather, the desert became the idealized domain that governed the consciousness of Arab culture. Over time, just as language proved to be a conscious "condition" that molded Arab culture, the world of the desert continued as the unconscious force that "conditioned" the Arab's perception of the visual world.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "The extracting and abstracting of invariants are what happens in both perceiving and knowing. To perceive the environment and to conceive it are different in degree but not in kind. One is continuous with the other. Our reasons for supposing that seeing something is quite unlike knowing something come from the old doctrine that seeing is having temporary sensations one after the other at the passing moment of present time. Whereas knowing is having permanent concepts stored in memory." See James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979), 258

<sup>4</sup> "Afṣaḥu-l-'arab abarruhum." Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut, 1955).

<sup>5</sup> Levi-Strauss writes, "Language can be said to be a *condition* of culture, and this in two different ways: First, it is a condition of culture in a diachronic way, because it is mostly through the language that we learn about our own cultures. . . . But also, from a much more theoretical point of view, language can be said to be a condition of culture because the material out of which language is built is of the

To the nomad, language was the only portable tool of self-expression. To the Muslim Arab, who believed God's revelation to be enshrined in his native tongue, language emerged as the kernel of all his arts; Western scholars, observing this phenomenon, attributed the dominance of language, as expressed in Arabic calligraphy, and the absence of naturalistic representation in the visual arts, to Islam's iconoclastic tradition. They argued that religious restrictions were the *premium mobile* in developing what has been called "an aesthetic of the concept" and "an aesthetic typology" in Islamic art.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, I challenge this argument, from a perspective that is outside the bounds of religious exegesis, and offer an explanation rooted in the Arab's own experience of his visual world.<sup>7</sup>

The Arab's primordial environment not only determined his interpretation of the visual world, but also served as the natural space in which his "semantic memory" was formed and in which his visual perceptions first emerged.<sup>8</sup> By examining the leading Arabic terms related to visuality, I hope to take a first step towards a better understanding of the Arab's earliest interpretation of his visual world. This should lead to a clearer view of the perceptive process in Islam's first language, a process which is vital to the formation of what has come to be called an "aesthetic of the concept" and an "aesthetic typology" in Islamic art.

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same type as the material out of which the whole culture is built: logical relations, oppositions, correlations, and the like. Language, from this point of view, may appear as laying a kind of foundation for the more complex structures which correspond to the different aspects of culture." See Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books), 68–69.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of what is referred to as an "aesthetic of the concept" and an "aesthetic typology" in Islamic art, see "The Making of a Muslim Aesthetic," in Alexandre Papadopoulos, *Islam and Muslim Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1976), 48–59.

<sup>7</sup> The definition of "visual world" as used throughout this paper, is borrowed from James J. Gibson. Reserving the definition to mean the awareness of the environment as it is obtained by vision, Gibson defines "the visual world" as "the outcome of the picking up of invariant information in an ambient optic array by an exploring visual system, and the awareness of the observer's own body in the world is part of the *experience*." [Emphasis mine.] See Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 207.

<sup>8</sup> For further reading on "semantic memory," see W. Kintsch, "Notes on the Structure of Semantic Memory," in E. Tulvin and W. Donaldson (eds.), *Organization of Memory* (New York: Academy Press, 1972); Elizabeth F. Loftus, "Nouns, Adjectives, and Semantic Memory," *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 96 (1972): 213–215; E.H. Grober and E.F. Loftus, "Semantic Memory: Searching for Attributes Versus Searching for Names," *Memory and Cognition*, 2 (1974): 413–416.

## ABUNDANCE AND SCARCITY IN VISUAL TERMS

The Arabic language contains an abundance of words that describe the visual world. The precision of these words is infinitesimal. For example, a brief survey of words lists 21 names for light, 29 for the sun, 32 for the moon, 50 for the clouds, 52 for darkness, 64 for the rain, 88 for the water-well, 170 for water, a couple of hundred words describe the horse, and several hundred words to describe the typological phenomenon of the desert landscape.

The precision sought in each variant term attempts to define the visible object in its surrounding context. This may involve luminosity and color reflection of the visible object, the quality of its substance and its surface structure, its translucency or opaqueness, its stillness or movement, its size, weight, dimensions and laterality, as well as its temporal or spatial relativity to the speaker. Arabic also contains subtle gradations of meaning of visual experience. There are for example, names for virtually every hour of day and night, for each night of the lunar month, for every lock of hair according to its location on the human body, for each way of seeing, of sitting, of sleeping, of moving and of loving.<sup>9</sup>

Today, Arabic, like other languages has abandoned most of the original words associated with the visual manifestation of the environment in which it was born. However, the legacy of the language, consecrated by Islam, continues to exert its primeval modalities on modern Arab thought. The luring effects of its primordial wealth live on in the vocabulary of some of its youngest poets.

In contrast to this wealth of words chronicling visual details, Arabic seems to enter into an amorphous realm in which the codes of a single word related to visibility, or to visual expression, are sometimes blurred and ambiguous. One word may in fact be interchangeably used to denote a number of meanings. That this ambiguity coexists alongside such precision is a phenomenon that is deeply embedded in the coding system of the language.

Since Arabic is a living language which retains elements of its primordial character, an examination of words that have survived to the present and that are intrinsically related to visibility may expand our understanding of the linguistic ambiguities associated with visual

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<sup>9</sup> Al-Tha'ālibī, *Fiqh al-Lughā wa Sirr al-'Arabiyya* (Cairo, n.d.).

perception. The examples of key words related to visual expression will be followed by examples of key words related to the different modes of visual perception. These examples will help illustrate, (1) how a single term simultaneously denotes two different modes of visual perception; (2) how a single term is consistently interchanged between a code originating in a visual experience with one originating in speech; (3) how the linguistic ambiguities emanating from the interchangeable codes of a single term can only be clarified through the context in which each term appears.<sup>10</sup>

By contrasting the ambiguities related to basic terms associated with visual perception against the meticulously precise vocabulary used to describe details, I wish to propose a tentative scheme to explore how patterns of coding intrinsic to the Arabic language may articulate visual thinking.

To illustrate the ambiguity and interchangeability of visual terms and the importance of context in determining meaning, I shall cite a series of examples belonging to two categories. First, I will cite examples that depict the three most common terms used in Arabic to refer to a primal sign of visual expression, followed by examples of two primal referents in the language, each conveying a different mode of seeing. The basic Arabic word used to denote the production of an image will then be discussed. In the second category I will explore a general view of the Arabic system of naming colors. Colors are discussed at some length because the earliest Arabs considered color to be the chief object of sight and the most inherent element in visuality. Additionally, the names of colors clearly reveal the peculiar relation established at the very beginning between Arabic and visual perception. In the first category, terms associated with visual cognition illustrate the ambiguities and interchangeabilities through the scarcity of conceptual definitions. In the second category, names given to colors, man's primary salients, mirror parallel ambiguities and interchangeabilities through the sheer abundance of perceptual definitions.

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<sup>10</sup> Dictionaries used for reference and cross-reference of terms are, E.A. Eliyas, *al-Qāmūs al-ʿArabī: ʿArabī Inḡlīzī* (Cairo, 1925); Buṭrus al-Bustānī, *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ* (Beirut, 1977); and *al-Munjid* (Beirut, 1987).

LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITIES AND INTERCHANGEABILITIES  
IN VISUAL TERMS

In any discourse on visual expression, perhaps one of the most common terms used in reference to a primal sign is the word for line. In Arabic, the equivalent word for this basic term innately reflects an ambiguity which can only be clarified through the word's context.

Without the benefit of context, the Arabic equivalent *khatt* can simultaneously mean "rule" or "line", or "handwriting" or even calligraphy. Thus, this single word is obscured with ambiguity. One code, that is "rule" or "line", reflects the perception of a visually abstract form. The other code, that is "handwriting" or "calligraphy", reflects the perception of speech taking a visual form.

By adding the end vowel "a" to the noun (*khatt*) simultaneously meaning "line" and "calligraphy" the word *khatta* becomes a verb. This new derivative verb also reflects the ambiguities between the term used for a visually abstract form and the term used for a visibility of speech. Thus, the verb *khatta* simultaneously means, to "draw" as well as to "write". Whether the word appears in its nominal (*khatt*) or its verbal (*khatta*) form, can only be fully comprehended in context in which the term appears. The first meaning, such as "line" or "drawing" is a denotation originating in the perception of visual abstraction; the second meaning, such as "calligraphy" or "prescription", is a denotation originating in the visual perception of speech.

Another term commonly used to refer to a primal sign is the Arabic noun *rasm*. As in the case of *khatt*, the noun *rasm* is a root-word that can simultaneously mean "drawing" as well as "prescription". Again, the first code denotes a visual representation which takes the abstract form of lines, while the second code denotes a visualization of speech. By adding an infix and a suffix to the root-word, the noun *rasm* takes a verbal form. Consequently, the verb *rasama* simultaneously means to "draw" as well as to "write". As in the case of *khatt* and *khatta* whether the term occurs in its nominal (*rasm*) or its verbal (*rasama*) form, comprehension can only be attained through the word's context.

These two examples of primal signs highlight how ambiguity can develop in a single term when both its nominal and verbal form denotes two separate meanings. In both cases, the ambiguity is contained within two forms of signs both of which are linear and one-dimensional. A final example of a primal sign essential to any discourse

on visual expression is the Arabic equivalent of the term denoting "form". This term amplifies the ambiguities found in the earlier two examples. In its nominal form, the term *shakl* denotes the meaning of "form." With the addition of the *a* infix and suffix, and the doubling of the middle letter, the noun becomes a verb, *shakkala*. The verb *shakkala* not only means "to shape" or "to fashion", but also to "vocalize." Thus, the same term used to convey the abstract perception of visual body is used to convey a perception originating in auditory signals which may be manifested optically or acoustically. Once again; only through knowing the context in which the term appears can one determine the meaning of the term.

The persistence of ambiguity in a single term conveying both a visual code as well as a visualization of speech is further amplified when one examines the primal referents denoting modes of seeing. The verb *nazara* for example, is the root-word meaning "to look". The word *nazra* is the derivative noun meaning a "glance". By doubling the middle sounds in the original verb the new word *nazzara* is created to mean "theorize". The derivative noun *nazariyya* becomes the word for "theory". In the case of this primal referent, morphological alterations did not transpose a term originating in visual perception to another originating in speech. On the contrary, it transferred the term originating in visual perception to one which culminates in the conceptualization of speech. Ambiguity reemerges as a major feature in the adjective form. Depending on the word's context, the adjective form *nazari* could simultaneously mean "optical" as well as "theoretical". The first refers to a perception, while the second to a conception.

Similarly, the root-word *basar* is the generic noun meaning "eyesight." The verb *basara* is the basic form meaning "to see" or "to discern." The derivative verb *abşara* could simultaneously mean either "to see" or "to understand." Here the morphological addition of a simple prefix to a primal referent endows a single term with two interchangeable codes. One defines the sensorial perception of optical vision, the other defines the conceptual receptivity of speech. Again, only through knowing the context in which the term appears, can meaning be apprehended.

Despite the interchangeability of codes between the verbs "to see" and "to understand," both belonging to the single verb *abşara*, auxiliary derivations are nowhere found to connote meanings associated with the verb "to perceive" or the noun "perception." The meanings

of these two concepts are to be found in a totally different root-word. The equivalent to the verb "to perceive" is found in the term *adraka*, and its nominal form *idrāk* denotes "perception." Since the notion of "perception" is central to any discourse on visual expression, this matter calls for more attentive scrutiny before we discuss the last of the primal referents, that which denotes the production of an image.

On its own, "perception" is not necessarily associated with any of man's senses; neither does the term specify whether or not any one, or more than one particular sense is involved in the process of perception. However, the case in Arabic appears to be clear as to the sense or senses involved, a fact which does not reduce the ambiguity emanating from the use of the term; instead, ambiguity is promoted to a different plain of conception.

The term *adraka* denoting the meaning of the verb to "perceive" and the derivative noun, *idrāk*, meaning "perception" connote the involvement of either of the two distance receptors which apprehend information at different proximities, namely eyesight and hearing.<sup>11</sup>

This connotation is corroborated by the fact that the verb *adraka* literally denotes motion either through spatial or temporal distance. Depending on its context, *adraka* means "to reach," "to arrive," "to attain," and "to mature." The nominal form, *idrāk*, thus connotes the involvement of either sense of sight or hearing; two sensory perceptions that are made possible through the traveling of sound waves or light rays. Simultaneously, and depending on the context, *idrāk* does not only mean "perception." It also means the mental faculty of "reason." Here, ambiguity which may have been earlier manifested between codes of a visual nature and that of speech, now expresses itself in a way which interchanges two distinctive codes, that of "perception" and of "reason." The first is related to the senses. The other is related to the mind. Only through context is the meaning of one or the other fully apprehended.

The main two primal referents (*naẓar* and *baṣar*), both related to modes of seeing, share common ambiguities with the three terms, discussed earlier, that are related to visual expression, (*khatt*, *rasm* and *shakl*). In all five examples cited, the ambiguities could only be clarified

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of distance receptors, see Edward T. Hall, "Perception of Space: Distance Receptors, Eyes, Ears, and Nose," in *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 41-50.

through knowing the context of the term. Similar examples of ambiguities clarified through context can be found in practically every other language. However, what characterizes the phenomenon in Arabic, as it relates to visual terms of expression, is the unwavering consistency with which the demarcation between a code originating in visual perception and another originating in speech is blurred. To further illustrate the significance of this particular interchangeability between a visual code and one of speech, I shall now turn to the most common word in the language which was and is still used to denote the production of a visual image. The root of the word is made up of the three letters, *ṣwr*.

In treatises on Islamic art, there is perhaps no single word that has received more attention than the word *ṣūra* (with the letter *ṣād* not *sīn*). The noun *ṣūra* is commonly understood to mean “likeness” or “image.” Its verbal form, *ṣawwara*, means “to shape” or “to fashion.” Beyond their theological connotation, it has been rare for forms of this word ever to be investigated in context of the study of art.

Nevertheless, a general review of the root-word *ṣawar* indicates that it shares with *naẓar* and *baṣar*—two words with which it rhymes—parallel variability and interchangeability of meaning. By adding the prefix *ta* to the original verb meaning “to shape,” the word *taṣawwar* assumes the meaning of the verb “to imagine.” *Taṣawwar* is also interchangeably used to mean “to conceive.” *Taṣawwur* meaning “conception.”

Here, the linguistic ambiguity noted earlier, that of obscuring the meaning of terms related to visual expression with those of speech, is magnified. As a result, the very term originating in the sensorial perception of optical vision itself becomes interchangeable with the abstract term meaning “conception.”

Interestingly, a look at the earliest uses of the word composed of its trilateral root *ṣwr* spelled *sur* reveals that the word has not been solely used in correlation with the sensory perception of seeing. Instead, it has been commonly used in correlation with auditory perception as well. For example, if one reviews the occurrences of the word in the Holy Qur’ān, one realizes that the word *ṣūra* meaning “image” or “likeness,” appears in three places. The verb *ṣawwara* meaning “to shape” or “to fashion” appears in five places. The word *sur* connoting sound, the “trumpet” which is believed will be blown on Judgement Day, appears in as many as ten places. The first two

cases clearly relate to a visual code, while the last is an auditory code.<sup>12</sup>

Today, the verb *ṣawwara* continues to convey any number of meanings related to reproducing visual images including “to draw,” “to paint,” “to portray,” “to represent” and “to take a photograph”—all visual forms of expression. However, the verb *sawara* lives on in the colloquial Arabic of people in many parts of the Arab world as a verb meaning “to hear an ear-splitting sound,” an auditory experience.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the one most common term used to express the act of making an image reflects in its most essential form two sensory perceptions, one “seeing,” the other “hearing.” The first denotes a visual code, the other a code of speech.

It is common in all languages for the same word to be used to express two different meanings. Arabic terms related to visual expression are not by any means the only terms in the language which relay ambiguity. Arabic lore is notorious for the multitude of tomes left behind by classical philologists who dedicated their careers to recording semantic ambiguities in the language.<sup>14</sup> The double usage of a key word such as *sur* could perhaps be an implicit indication which reveals the tangible origins of how Arabic may have generated meaning.

Through this pivotal term, the example of the previous ambiguous codes related to visuality may be understood in a new light. By being a single term that denotes simultaneously both the act of producing

<sup>12</sup> The noun *ṣūra*, meaning “image” or “likeness,” appears in *The Holy Qur’an* in three places. They are suras LX, verse 64; LXIV:3; LXXXII:8. The verb *ṣawwara*, meaning “to shape” or “to fashion” appears in a total of five places. They are III:6, and VII:11, in addition to the same three places cited earlier: LX:64, LXIV:3, and LXXXII:8. The noun *ṣūr* meaning “trumpet” appears in ten places, they are VI:73; XVIII:99, XX:102; XXIII:10; XXVII:87; XXXVI:51; XXXIX:61; L:20; LXIX:13; and LXXVIII:18. God’s attribute, *al-Muṣawwir*, meaning “the bestower of forms” appears in a single verse, LXI:24. See *al-Muḥjam al-Mufassar li-alfāz al-Qur’an al-Karīm*, edited by Muḥammad F. ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo, 1968), 416.

<sup>13</sup> In *al-Munjid*, the classical noun *sur* and the colloquial verb *ṣawar*, are explained to be of Syriac origin (439). For further information on the colloquial use of the verb *ṣawar*, see also Martin Hinds and El-Said Badawi, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*, (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1986), 514.

<sup>14</sup> The extensive studies on the subject of *al-addād* meaning “the opposites,” were the subject of all major Arab philologists, including Qurtubī (d. 821 A.D.), al-Aṣma‘ī (d. 828 A.D.), Ibn Sukayt (d. 858 A.D.), al-Sajistānī (d. 869 A.D.) and Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 939 A.D.). For a comprehensive work see, for example, Muḥammad H. al-Yāsīn, *al-Addād fī l-Lughā* (Baghdad, 1974).

an image, *sūra* (image), and (to make an image), as well as producing a sound, *sur* (trumpet) and *sawar* (hearing an earsplitting sound), the term amplifies how the language in its formative period may have begun to define visual and auditory perceptions in alternative codes.

What is of particular significance in this context may be found in a brief comparison between two of the fundamental terms discussed above. The first is the term meaning “perception” (*idrāk*), the other conception (*taṣawwur*). While the root-word of the term of “perception” (*idrāk*) does not derive from a primal referent indicating a visual code of seeing, the root-word of the term for “conception” (*sur*) does derive, as noted earlier, from a visual code, that of “image-making.” The term for “perception,” as its basic form demonstrated above, explicitly implies—through spatial and temporal distance—the involvement of sight and of hearing. In contrast, the term “conception” subliminally buries the same two senses in its most basic form, *sur*, from which the abstraction of the term originally derives. Thus, the ambiguities emanating from the interchangeability in meaning between “perception” and “reason,” as well as between “conception” and “imagination,” do not seem to be simply a product of arbitrary precedence. All indications point to the fact that suggests growth from earlier ambiguities originating in visual perception and in speech. The consistency and nature of these ambiguities, as indicated above, suggest that the alternating of two codes, belonging to a single term, may well have originated in the sensorial realm of seeing and hearing.

By means of the senses, prototypical modes of cognition intuitively crossed between visual and linguistic codes. Tools outlining visual perception were naturally interchanged with those articulating speech. The primal sign of visual expression, which still uses the single term to denote both verbs, “to draw” and “to write,” continues to remind us of the fact that the same tools have been originally used to annotate the visual and linguistic codes alike.<sup>15</sup> I venture to suggest, very tentatively, that the consistent crossover between a code originating in visual perception with that of one originating in speech may itself

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<sup>15</sup> The angular characteristics of the prototypical Arabic script indicate that the hard-edged tools used for etching signs on stone dictated the script’s linear characteristics. The earliest form of Arabic script, known as the Kufic, seems to have been dictated by the chisel’s sharp edge marks on a stone. With the consequent invention of more flexible tools, such as the pen and paper, the Arabic script took more curvilinear forms.

be a linguistic manifestation of the functional disposition of the human brain as it instinctively associates the use of tools in speech.

In the brain, the motor skills of the hand and the production of speech are controlled by two adjacent areas.<sup>16</sup> The proximity of these two areas led to the belief that historically speech developed in parallel synchronicity to man's developmental use of tools.<sup>17</sup> What is commonly called a "spread" from one area to another, is believed to be the product of the furtive closeness between hand coordination and speech production. A vivid illustration of this proximity between the motor organ of the hand and speech, which is termed a "spread," could be exemplified in our observation of a child learning to write. In the child's concentrated effort to control the movements of his hand, he intuitively rolls the tongue and often simultaneously spells out loud the sounds of the word as the sounds are acquiring their visual form.<sup>18</sup>

The above illustration of the writing child, perhaps in a nutshell, explains the physiological premise as to how in Arabic the root-word *swr* originally meant to make an image as well as to produce a sound; it may also explain how a verb emanating from the term meaning "form" continues to alternatively mean "to shape" as well as "to vocalize." Likewise, established axioms such as Ibn al-Abbās's "calligraphy is the tongue of the hand" may also be read as a metaphoric extension reflecting a subliminal articulation of the "spread" syndrome.<sup>19</sup>

However, what is of utmost significance to our focus in examining

<sup>16</sup> See F.R. Winton and L.E. Bayliss, *Human Physiology* (London, 1948), 432-433. Furthermore, "scientists speculate that the roots of adult brain specializations lie buried deep in prehistoric times." Also, that the "specialization" of each of the brain's hemispheres simultaneously developed in accordance with the preference of using one or the other hand. See Richard M. Restak, *The Brain* (New York: Bantam Books), 240.

<sup>17</sup> "Having thrown the whole weight of his body on his feet, man lost the prehensivity of his toes, but with his hands free, his fingers became capable of the most delicate movements. This was a gradual process. The first effect of the new posture was to relieve the pressure on the jaws by transferring from them to the hands such tasks as tearing and crushing foods . . . accordingly, the jaws began to contract, thus leaving room for further expansion of the brain; and, as the brain expanded, so it became capable of—subjecting the hands to an ever closer control. It is to this parallel development of hand and brain that we must look for the physiological origin of man's two cardinal characteristics: the use of tools, and of speech." George Thomson, "Speech and Thought," in *The First Philosophers* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, Ltd., 1955), reprinted in David Craig (ed.), *Marxists on Literature: An Anthology* (London: Penguin Books, 1975), 25-46.

<sup>18</sup> Thomson, *Speech and Thought*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> "Al-Khaṭṭ Lisān al-Yad."

the issuing interchangeability of codes lies somewhere else. If these linguistic ambiguities and interchangeability in visual codes are indeed developed during the formative period of the language, as suggested above, then the linguistic "spread" should explain two interrelated issues. First, that the "spread" as manifested in the language was the conceptual premise which helped shape the kind of discourse that was later to be promoted by visual arts in Islam. Two, that the process of conceptualization of the visual world did not only shape Arab perception in the distant past but that it continues to articulate visual perceptions through the language of today.

I have already discussed the three most common terms used in Arabic which refer to a primal sign, namely, "line," "drawing," and "form." That was followed with a discussion of two primal referents in the language, each conveying a different mode of seeing. Last, discussion centered upon the pivotal term in the language, denoting the production of images.

In all the above three areas, whether the semantic ambiguity was a product of *polysemy* that is the multiple meaning of the word, or *homonymy*, where two different words have the same form, we have seen how context is critical to meaning. More importantly, it has been noted how a term expressing a visual perception is consistently interchanged with one related to speech and how this interchangeability in turn may itself be a primordial notion reflecting a basic function of the human brain.

#### COLOR TERMS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE VISUAL WORLD

In an attempt to develop a perspective that allows us to interpret the ramifications of the linguistic phenomenon discussed above, I shall now turn to the subject of color, which is the primal salient in visual cognition.

Colors were recognized by the earliest Arabs as the most fundamental components of the visible world. A brief inquiry into the voluminous system established to identify color reveals how the earliest Arabs began to regularize their awareness of visual perception. In this brief inquiry, I will explore how Arabic speakers went to great lengths to endow a primal sensation of visuality with a phonetic referent. This exploration demonstrates how deeply rooted is the Arab recognition of the relation between visual and auditory per-

ception. It also illustrates that the visual terms cited earlier that were dependent on context are themselves a reflection of a wider transitional contextuality intrinsic to the sensorial experience of the visual world of the desert.<sup>20</sup>

According to Arab tradition light and darkness, which contained metaphoric connotations, preceded all descriptions of the visual world. After that, color ranked above all other phenomenon in identifying visibility.<sup>21</sup>

The Arabic names given to the basic colors illustrate how the spectral order established for the primary visual salients was transposed on a congruent phonetic order. Secondary colors, believed to be a product of different shades, tones and hues of the basic colors, are formed differently. Specifying names for the various shade of color again reflected the ambiguity and importance of context.

On the surface, the color spectrum recognized by the Arabs is similar to the process of identification found in many other languages. The classification of colors has been universally categorized into a limited number of what was believed to be basic colors and an unlimited range of color shades believed to be the product of mixing different components of the basic colors. Generally, basic colors were identified in most cultures with a set of arbitrary names, whereas other shades usually followed an empirical course emanating either from a metaphoric or a referential source.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The main sources for color names used are 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Ibrāhīm (ed.), *Qāmūs al-Ahwān 'inda l-'Arab* (Cairo, 1989); and Abdelaziz Benabdellah (ed.), *Mu'jam al-Ahwān/Lexique des COD Couleurs Français-Arabe* (Rabat, 1969).

<sup>21</sup> In *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*, which dates back to the 10th century A.D., the authors ranked the identification of visibility in the following order: light, darkness, color, surface, body, form, dimension, movement, stillness, laterality. See vol. II (Beirut, n.d.), 408. Al-Fayrūzabādī (d. 1414 A.D.) defined color as being the main element that "separates an object from another." Arabic dictionaries continue to use al-Fayrūzabādī's definition in describing the meaning of the word *lawn*. See *Muḥīṭ al-Muḥīṭ*, 832, and *al-Munjid*, 740. Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī (d. 1063 A.D.) went as far as to declare that "nothing is visible except color," and also that "light is color." See the recent edition of his *Risālat al-Ahwān* (Riyadh, 1979), 16. Al-Ḥasan Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1041 A.D.), known in the West as Alhazen, was a key influence in medieval Europe's distinction between sense, knowledge and inference. He wrote, "nothing visible is understood by the sense of sight alone save light and colors." See his *Kitāb al-Manāzīr*, edited by 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Ṣabrā (Kuwait, 1983), 72–120. For the most definitive work on the subject of color, see *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* by John Cage (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993). In particular see Chapter 3: "Light from the East", 39–68.

<sup>22</sup> For a general study, see Brent Berlin and Kay Paul, *Basic Color Terms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); also, Marc M. Bornstein, "Color Vision and

The Arabic color lexicon stands apart in a number of ways. Foremost among them is the formidable attempt to devise a phonetic sound system for color names. The ranking of the colors in the visual spectrum is reflected in the phonetic sound of the names of color. Thus, names for each color among the six basic colors begin with the first letter of the alphabet. All six names are composed of two equal syllables carrying the same metrical form, *af'al*. The six color names can be classified in two phonetic groups. Three of the color names are in phonetic consonance with each other; that is, the first syllable opens up with the same vowel /a/ and the second syllable ends with the same rhyme /ar/. They are *aḥmar* (red), *akḥḍar* (green) and *ašfar* (yellow). In contrast, the other three basic colors following the same metrical form reflect a phonetic assonance. Two of them begin with /a/ and end with the same rhyme /ad/. They are *abyaḍ* (white) and *aswad* (black). The third variation, *azraq* (blue), which still follows the same metrical form of all other basic color names, shows the least phonetic resemblance to any of the other basic color names. Two, visually recognized as opponent colors (red and green), rhyme, and are in the consonantal group. Two other opponent colors (black and white) rhyme, and are in the assonantal group. The remaining color (yellow) of the consonantal group which is visually recognized as being the opponent color of the remaining color (blue) in the assonantal group does rhyme with the opponent color.<sup>23</sup>

The Arabic formula which attempts, with utmost mathematical precision, to transpose the primal sensation of the basic colors into a phonetic order calls for further study. The ramifications implied here could be very significant, especially in light of recent research using color as stimulus to study the relationship between language and thought.<sup>24</sup> The significance could be heightened even further,

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Color Naming: A Psycho-physiological Hypothesis of Cultural Difference," *Psychological Bulletin*, 80, 257-285; and Eleanor Rosch Heider, "Universals in Color Naming and Memory," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 93 (1972): 10-30.

<sup>23</sup> For scientific research related to the significance of opponent colors in visual perception, see Leo Hurvich and Dorothea Jameson, "An Opponent-Process Theory of Color Vision," *Psychological Review* 64 (1967): 384-404. Also by the same authors, "Opponent Processes as a Model of Neural Organizations," *American Psychologist* (1974): 88-100.

<sup>24</sup> For further reading on the use of color as a stimulus to study the relationship between language and thought, see for example, Heinrich Zollinger, "A Linguistic Approach to the Cognition of Colour Vision," *Folia Linguistica* 9, nos. 1-4 (1976):

when viewed in terms of the information related to the specifications concerning the empirical color lexicon which nomadic Arabs invented to name shades believed to have been composed from the basic colors.

A brief examination of the Arabic names for the color shades further illustrates how the naming of shades reflects ambiguities and interchangeabilities associated with terms, discussed earlier, which were related to visual experience and the production of visual images.

This examination will also demonstrate that as much as context proved to be a key factor in understanding the exact use of a visual term, so does context become essential in the identification of color shades.

Similar to many other cultures, traditional Arabic names of color shades are derived from the natural references belonging to the Arab's earliest visual environment. However, despite limitations of the barren desert landscape, or perhaps because of it, the boundless wealth of traditional names given to the minutest changes in color shades demonstrated an extraordinary awareness of visual cognition. The precision with which each name attempts to convey the tonal value of a particular color shade seems to be the product of an innate response.

Phonetically, names of a wide range of color shades followed the metrical form used for the basic color names. Some names of color shades rhyme with the consonantal color group. Other names of color shades followed the metrical form of the assonantal color group, or components thereof.<sup>25</sup> Many more names of color shades followed metrical forms belonging to neither of the two groups. The issue most pertinent to address is the process by which a color shade is given a referential name. Disclosing the main characteristics of this process would put into perspective the points discussed above regarding the subject of codal ambiguities as they pertain to visual expression in the language. Additionally, the disclosure of how environmental

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26S. Also by Zollinger, "Correlations Between the Neurobiology of Colour Vision and the Psycholinguistics of Colour Naming," *Experientia*, 15, no. 1 (1979): 1-8. For a reevaluation of Whorf's theory as it relates to this question, see, "Whorf and His Critics: Linguistic and Nonlinguistic Influences on Color Memory," *American Anthropologist* (1981): 581-615.

<sup>25</sup> *Abshar* (flesh color), *ashqar* (blond), *ashar* (sand color), *ajham* (red), *adham* (black), *akhtam* (black), *ahlas* (spotted brown), *adhas* (red), *abghath* (spotted black and white), *akhal* (dark blue), *ak-hab* (dark gray). See Benbdellah, *Mu'jam al-Akwān*, 19.

referents figure in the naming of color shades further paves the way to a better comprehension of the relationship between man and nature in Arab thought.

On the surface level, Arab referential naming of secondary colors and their individual gradations, is similar to referential color naming in many other cultures. Universally, referential color naming is employed mainly by extracting the name from a natural property of the environment. Generally speaking, the extraction could be deduced in the form of a substitution in which the name of the color shade is identical to the name of the natural property. An example would be the naming of the color orange which is extracted from a fruit, violet from a flower, or turquoise from a stone. Referential colors may be metaphorically employed as in olive-green, sky-blue, canary-yellow.

Arabs have actually excelled in referential color naming, which reflected an assiduous observation of their desert environment. However, the referential process by which a color shade is identified evolves according to different modes of perception. The first mode identifies the grade of a color shade within the *context* of a sequential moment in time. The passing of time determines the specificity of the color shade. The second mode identifies gradations of a color within the *context* of a color's location and laterality within the boundaries of the specified referent observed. As a result, the object's name becomes identified with the name of the very color shade it carries.

Examples from only two basic colors, red and white, are sufficient to illustrate how color shades emerge from an ever changing temporal context. I turn first to the color white. The basic color white belonging to a locust changes names according to whether the locust is observed as an egg, a walking insect or an insect with wings.<sup>26</sup> Another shade of white belonging to a cloud changes names according to whether the cloud is seen on a clear day, before a storm, while it is raining or after it has rained.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, the specification of shades of the basic color red belong-

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<sup>26</sup> The color of a locust as an egg is referred to as *al-siru*; a walking insect as *al-dhāba*; an insect with wings as *al-armak*. See Ibrāhīm, *Qāmūs al-Akwān*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> On a clear day a white cloud is identified as *al-bakhr*; before a storm a heavy cloud with a tint of green is called *al-hanatim*; while it is raining the dark gray cloud is called *al-sahab*; after it has rained the cloud is called *al-dajn*. These are only four names among 50 describing clouds by means of their color and through their temporal context. See *ibid.*, 14, 54, 78, and 94.

ing to a fruit changes names according to whether the fruit is observed when it is unripe, while it is ripening, or after it has matured.<sup>28</sup> The color shades of the same color connoting blood change names according to whether blood is fluid and seen through the skin, or seen wet outside the body, or observed dry on a surface of an object.<sup>29</sup> The preeminence of the element of time in determining the specificity of a color shade is further reinforced by the fact that the morphological system of Arabic allows the transformation of a word that is basically an adjective to take the form of a verb. Thus, a color shade can be described in its gradational sequence through its state of becoming.

As to the second mode of perception which identifies a color shade *in context* of its location and laterality, classical Arabic went to great lengths to specify in painstaking detail the name of color shades. Realizing, (1) that color can never be seen in a vacuum but that it can only be seen in the context of its adjacent colors; and (2) that the same color shade changes its tonal appearance according to what other color is adjacent to it, Arabs gave independent names to color shades in context of all imaginable locations and lateralities.<sup>30</sup>

In each particular case, the name of a color shade changes depending on whether the shade is that of an animate or an inanimate referent. Thus, the same color shade changes names depending on whether the color observed belongs to the body of a horse, to human skin, to a nearby stone or to distant sand dunes.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the names of color shades on the body of a horse seem to affect the

<sup>28</sup> The unripe fruit with a hint of color is called *al-busr*; while the fruit is ripening it is called *al-khalak*; once the fruit is ripened but is still green, it is called *al-ruṭḥ*; after it ages a fruit is called *al-tamr*. See *ibid.*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> The pink color shade of blood seen under the skin is called *al-batha'*, when the blood is fluid, it is called *al-bahir*; after the blood dries on an object, the color is referred to as *al-jasid*. See *ibid.*, 13, 14, 32–33.

<sup>30</sup> Throughout history, the perception of color and color shades in context of lateralities has been the focus of study by artists and theoreticians alike. For contemporary studies on color and the contextuality of its perception see, Joseph Albers, *Interaction of Colors* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963); also Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1973); *Color Harmonies* by Augusto Garau with forward by Rudolf Arnheim (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> The horse that is mostly white is identified by its own color name as *al-ashhab*. The shade of white apparent in human skin is identified as *al-amhaq*. The white color observed in a nearby stone is called *al-basra* and the white shade of distant sand dunes is identified as *al-naqa*. See Ibrahim, *Qāmūs al-Alwān*, 18, 183; also al-Tha'ālibi, *Fiqh al-Lughā*, 120–122.

very identification of the horse. Color names change according to whether the color appears on the horse's forehead, the neck, the back, the legs, the flanks or the tail. Similarly, the name of the same color shade on the horse changes, depending on whether the shade appears next to one shade or another and whether the color shade appears in the form of stripes, dots or patches.<sup>32</sup>

As would be imagined, the referential process employed by the Arabs created a color lexicon of infinitesimal variability in the language. Yet, in this language that can claim to have as many as two dozen different names to the shades of a single color, names of opposite colors on the spectrum such as black and white, red and green, can be interchanged.

Thus, the word meaning white can be used to describe the color of coal. The green color of a plant can be used to mean the red color of a horse. Similarly, the dark shade of night can be alternatively used to mean the light color of day.<sup>33</sup> As much as an extensive knowledge of the lexicon is needed to comprehend the boundless shades of meanings, context remains the key factor in comprehending the interchangeable meanings of a single term.

<sup>32</sup> The following examples are only related to the white color as it relates to its position on the body of a horse. A hint of white on the horse's forehead is called *qurḥa*, a wider stripe of white on its forehead is called *ghurra*. When the top part of the horse's head is white it is called *rukḥma*. If all the horse's face is white except for dark halos around his eyes, it is called *mubarqa'*. If the entire head and neck are white it is called *adra'*. If the horse is mostly white with a black back it is called *raḥlā'*. If one or two of his sides are white it is called *akhsaf*. If his belly is white it is called *anbaṭ*. If his frontal flanks are white it is called *aḥḥaf*. If his back flanks are white it is called *āzar*. If the horse's four legs are white under the ankle it is called *muḥajjal*. If only one leg is white it is called *arjal*. If the thighs are white it is called *ablaq*. If only the tail is white it is called *ash'al*. See al-Tha'ālibī, *Fiqh al-Lughā*, 124–126. The name of a color is also identified according to the shade of color it appears next to. Thus, black next to red is called *amak* whereas black next to green is called *akḥḥab*. As to the form affecting the name of a color, the word *khūṭḥan* describes a yellow background with green stripes; *marqūm* describes black stripes on white; similarly, the words *arqash* and *arqaṭ* describe, respectively, a white or black background with dots or patches made up of the opposite color. See Ibrahim, *Qāmūs al-Atwān* 67–68, 101, 103, and 106.

<sup>33</sup> The color name *akhḍar* meaning green, is used to describe a jet black horse, as well as the color of darkness belonging to a starless night. See *ibid.*, 66–67. Similarly, *dubs*, which identifies a shade of red mixed with black, is used to mean a shade of green mixed with black. See *ibid.*, 75. The color name *lama*, referring to the red belonging to dark lips, when morphologically changed to *lamyā'* means the dark green of a tree's shadow. See *ibid.*, 228. Similarly, the color name *adīm* is alternatively used to mean the black color of night as well as the white brightness of daylight. See *ibid.*, 11.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The above two categories of terms related to visuality, the first including terms on visual expression and modes of seeing and the second referring to the color lexicon, reveal two sides which complete each other in communicating visual perception. The examination of terms in the first category suggests that the consistent interchangeability between codes of speech and of visual cognition within the single term represents a vivid illustration of how Arabic continues to retain its prototypal form. The examination of terms in the second category shows how the visual world of the desert was the natural place in which the prototypal forms of the language found their earliest signs. In terms belonging to the first category, the interchangeability of codes reflecting a "spread" between the two senses of hearing and of seeing echoed the primeval perception which, by means of the common tools, had linked the articulation of a sound with the visual formation of its sign. In the second category of terms, the infinitesimal abundance of contextual names given to different color shades demonstrates the individuation of a visual world that was in perpetual transition. Whether terms belong to the first or the second category, context continued to be the key to disambiguate the primeval obscurities related to meaning.

As discussed above, the three primal signs, "line," "drawing," and "form" denoted visual expression as each term took the form of a noun. The three primal referents discussed, "to look," "to see," and "to fashion" denoted modes of seeing as each term took the form of a verb. Finally, the primal salients of color were discussed, as each primary and secondary color took the form of an adjective. All the terms examined, whether they belonged to the first or the second category of terms, were indispensable to any discourse on visual perception or to visual expression.

The subject of how the linguistic phenomenon reviewed under the above two categories may have shaped the course of visual expression in Islamic art, is a subject which lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, if visual perception which made Islamic art possible can be seen as one which was established in the "semantic memory" of the desert landscape, then we are on the road towards understanding not only why Islamic art called for an "aesthetic of the concept" but more importantly how the primeval qualities in the prototypal remnants in Arabic may be shaping today's visual thinking.

## EXPLORATIONS IN EXILE AND CREATIVITY: THE CASE OF ARAB-AMERICAN WRITERS

HALIM BARAKAT

*And hence an exile am I, and an exile I shall remain until death lifts me up  
and bears me even unto my country.*

Gibran, from *The Tempests*

*Phoenix, your banishment and mine are one.*

Adonis

This inquiry into the life and works of Arab-American writers is part of a much broader attempt at free exploration into the nature of an intricate process of inter-relationships between creativity and exile. In a previous unpublished work in Arabic, I originally conducted such an inquiry focusing on literary creativity associated with a peculiar form of migration (*hijra*) akin to alienation and uprootedness. At the time I envisioned this form of *hijra* as intertwined with profound and enduring feelings of exile as a result of a continuing identification with and a lasting nostalgia for one's native country in contrast to another form of voluntary *hijra* that ends in self-fusion or immersion into and adoption of the identity of the host country.<sup>1</sup>

For sometime since then, I have been trying to develop my views in this area benefiting from related works in the fields of sociology of literature and sociology of knowledge and cultural studies in general, focusing more specifically on comparative studies of literature of exile. I benefited as well from the experiences of my generation of Arab writers currently residing in Europe and America and my own personal experience as portrayed in my novel *Ṭa'ir al-Howm* (The Crane, 1988).

Throughout this search, I began to formulate some general observations about broader conditions contributing to creativity in Arabic

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<sup>1</sup> Ḥalīm Barakāt, "Tasā'ulāt ḥawla al-ʿAlāqa bayn al-Ibdāʿ wa l-Hijra" (Inquiries into the relationship between creativity and migration), a presentation at Assila cultural festival on Arab intellectuals abroad (*al-mufakkirūn al-ʿarab fī l-mahjar*), Morocco, August 24–27, 1987. This presentation was further developed and delivered at a seminar for the Middle East section of the Library of Congress celebrating its 50 years of service, Sept. 29, 1995.

literature: the severity of exile, Ovidian banishment, encounters of civilizations, cultural pluralism, and sanctuaries that provide safe distances from centers of political and social-cultural authorities in home countries.

With this task in mind, I began to wonder about the secrets behind the rich innovativeness of the Abbasid and Andalusian Arabic writings and the role they played in the development of new forms of cultural expressions. Hence the preoccupation of Arab literary critics with social and cultural diversity in the Abbasid period and continuity and change in Andalusian poetry.<sup>2</sup> This has led me in turn to broaden my observations by examining those peculiarities of historical periods which witnessed special cultural innovativeness as during the Abbasid era—an era characterized by decentralization of political and social authority, emergence of pluralism and fermentation of inter-cultural exchange between the dominant civilizations at the time. Two other periods—those following the weakening and collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the second half of the twentieth century which witnessed several crises leading to the development of acute consciousness and critical thought bent on re-examining Arab reality.

I must point out that I have been encouraged to pursue this interest of mine in exploring the nature of relationship between exile and creativity because of its acute relevance to the understanding of the lengthy transitional modern period through which Arab society has been undergoing severe crises. Throughout this century, there have been constant Arab intellectual migration to Europe and the Americas. Here, I am referring in particular to the migration at the turn of the century and subsequent appearance of literary circles and works which contributed to the modernization or even the revolutionization of Arabic writings. The founding in 1921 of *al-Rābiʿa al-Qalamīyya* (Pen League) by Gibran Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931), Mīkhāʿīl Nuʿaymah (1889–1988), Iliyā Abū Māḍī (1890–1957), and a few others represented the maturity of the *mahjarī* cultural movement which constituted the first significant wave of literary modernity in contemporary Arab life. It is this movement in my opinion which is most illustrative of my argument with respect to the existence of a positive relationship between creativity and exile. Before I attempt

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<sup>2</sup> Salma Khadra Jayyusi, “Al-Shiʿr al-Andalusī: al-ʿAlāqa maʿa al-Mashriq,” *Nadwa*, no. 3 (June 1995).

to develop this thesis, however, I feel obligated to define both concepts with some elaboration.

My definition of exile is not restricted to forceful banishment by political authorities. The literature in this area of research has often distinguished between involuntary and voluntary forms of exile. In the former case, as stated by Bettina L. Knapp, a person is “banished or expelled from one’s native land by authoritative decree” in comparison to the latter situation where “one escapes persecution, evades punishment or stressful circumstances, or carves out a new existence for oneself.”<sup>3</sup>

Knapp also distinguished between exoteric and esoteric forms of exile. By the former, she referred to “banishment outside country”—a form which “may be identified with extroverted behavioral patterns” whereby “meaning and value are applied mostly to external objects rather than to inner subjective matters.”<sup>4</sup> An instance of exoteric exile, according to Knapp, is the flight or Hijra of Prophet Muḥammad to Yathrib. “Esoteric or private exile”, on the other hand, “suggests a withdrawal on the part of individual from the empirical realm and a desire to live predominantly in the inner world.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, to live inwardly or in the subliminal realms is to exile oneself from outside relationships. An instance of this esoteric experience is represented by Islamic mystics who preach spiritual and emotional exile.<sup>6</sup>

To illustrate her views, Knapp refers to Voltaire, Heine, and Hugo who exiled themselves from their native land. During Hugo’s eighteen-year exile (1852–70) from France, he wrote some of his greatest poems. For Proust who considered true life to exist only in the creative process, esoteric exile became a way of life. Joseph Conrad knew both exoteric and esoteric exile. His *Heart of Darkness* (1902) was written after his journey/exile to Central Africa. Similarly, James Joyce chose exile from his native Ireland. Several other most innovative writers such as Henry James, Ezra Pound, Henry Miller, T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, W.H. Auden, and Aldous Huxley were displaced from their native lands. There were also Latin

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<sup>3</sup> Bettina L. Knapp, *Exile and the Writer: Exoteric and Esoteric Experiences in A Jungian Approach* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

American writers including Carlos Fuentes, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortazar, Gabriel Garcia Marquez who had the same experiences producing some of the best literary works of this century.<sup>7</sup>

It is in Knapp's view that "to retreat into the transpersonal inner recesses of the psyche, defined by C.G. Jung, as the collective unconscious . . . is to penetrate a world inaccessible for the most part to conscious understanding."<sup>8</sup> Thus it is from the collective unconscious and mythical layers that great writers draw their best materials. That may explain why ships and sea voyages, symbolically viewed, involve passages through space and time, suggesting an unconscious need on the part of travelers to recast their life experiences in the most creative forms. This is embodied in Noah's Ark, Buddha's role as "the great Navigator", Osiris' "Night Sea Crossing", and Gilgamesh's voyage to the ocean of death. Hence the view of exile as an art.

In the first century A.D., the poet Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso) was banished to a remote village of the Black Sea. Inspired by this experience of exile from his native Latin tongue, novelist David Malouf wrote an unusually poetic and moving work of fiction entitled *An Imaginary Life*, a metamorphosis of the poet Ovid in exile. Hence the stirring of new life and painful transformation in the midst of aimless wanderings in lands of fables. By seeing the world through the language of the other, he began to see it differently. Yet in this timeless place, his past reoccurs in all its fullness. Establishing close contact with the other has come to mean re-establishment of contact with an enriched self. Beyond boundaries, his mind ventures freely in land of mystery. Thus, his childhood began to return to him discovering his humanity at last. By undergoing these changes, a whisper is heard: "I am the border beyond which you must go if you are to find your true life."<sup>9</sup>

There are those Arab writers who chose exile from their native land and they continue to do so in waves. Some, not unlike Odysseus, wandered about the seas of the world hoping for return. There was also those who knew both exoteric and esoteric exile the way Joseph Conrad did. For others, as for Proust or Joyce, exile became a way of life discovering in it a true precondition of creativity. In exile, they wrote their greatest works. This must have led to what is called

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>9</sup> David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (Vintage International, 1996), 136.

in Arabic *adab al-mahjar* (émigré literature) as distinct from literature produced within the native country. The same is true of what is called literature of exile on world wide level which is often produced during a prolonged separation from one's country.

One may also identify a special form of exile whereby writers may refrain from publishing their works inside their native countries or resort to the use of symbols and metaphors in an attempt to escape state censorship and persecution. In fact, my interest in the interplay of creativity and exile can best be understood in the context of discussing the marginality of Arab writers in their own native land. That may explain why Arab writers who reside abroad have often been told that they can better serve Arab cause by being outside rather than inside. While this exile at home may be among the most severe forms of alienation, the scope of this paper and limited time will not allow me to give it more than a passing reference.

For Edward Said, himself banished from his native country and tongue, exile "is predicated on the existence of love for, and a real bond with one's native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home . . ." <sup>10</sup> In the same context, he notes that exile "far from being the fate of nearly forgotten unfortunates who are dispossessed and expatriated, becomes something closer to a norm, an experience of crossing boundaries and charting new territories . . ." <sup>11</sup> On the other hand and with his own experience as a Palestinian in mind, Said perceives of exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home. The essential sadness of the break can never be surmounted." <sup>12</sup> In this respect, he adds that "exile is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past." <sup>13</sup>

Having perceived of exile as "one of the saddest fates" and "a condition of terminal loss," Said then wonders why is it that exile has been "transformed into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture," and concludes that exile "means that you are always

<sup>10</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (N.Y.: Alfred Knopf, 1993), 336.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 317.

<sup>12</sup> "The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile," *Harper's Magazine* (Sept., 1984): 49-55.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

going to be marginal, and that what you do as an intellectual has to be made up because you cannot follow a prescribed path."<sup>14</sup>

In *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said draws our attention to the transformation of exile during the twentieth century from exquisite punishment of special individuals into a cruel punishment of whole communities and peoples. In this category he places Armenians, Palestinians and others who have been victimized by widespread territorial rearrangements. Because of this condition which he describes as metaphorical, he focused on exiled intellectuals who will not make the adjustments required by living in the host country, "preferring instead to remain outside the mainstream, unaccommodated, unco-opted, resistant."<sup>15</sup> This way the exiled intellectual leads the life of an unyielding and marginal outsider who resists prescribed ways of life.

This metaphorical condition of marginality is what I consider a basic source of creativity as I would like to demonstrate later when I address myself to the works of *mahjarī* writers. Here, however, I would point out that Arab-American writers cannot be considered as transplants the way the term was used by Conrad who defined a transplant as someone who is "uprooted" and whose "state of existence" is "unnatural".<sup>16</sup> Conrad himself "turned to writing to transcend his transplantation turning the art of seamanship into the art of imaginative literature which became for him the means of surviving the hardships of his exile and coming to terms with his own transplanted existence."<sup>17</sup> In fact, he "was constantly haunted by feelings of guilt and remorse for leaving behind his trouble-ridden country."<sup>18</sup> We are further told that one of the many paradoxes in *Heart of Darkness* "conveys Conrad's view of exile: if a transplant fully identifies himself with the past, he is to die; if the complete identification is with the newly acquired present, the same fate awaits him."<sup>19</sup>

The exile's condition as defined by Edward Said generates feelings not only of sadness and nostalgia but also of wanting to explore

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 49, and *Representations of the Intellectual* (N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1994), 62.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>16</sup> Asher Z. Milbauer, *Transcending Exile* (Florida International University Press, 1985), xi.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 21–22.

uncharted horizons. Such are the exact feelings of exile expressed by Maḥmūd Darwīsh, the most celebrated of the Palestinian poets. His poetry conveys the feelings of sadness experienced by Palestinians living in a state of uprootedness or under occupation:

Where should we go after the last frontiers,  
Where should the birds fly after the last sky?<sup>20</sup>

Such feelings are also as vividly expressed by Fawaz Turki, another exiled Palestinian writer who has lived a vulnerable condition of marginality unable to accommodate the demands and norms of both the native and the host countries:

If you have not met Palestinians  
in exile,  
you are fortunate  
. . . . They live inside the belly of the whale  
. . . waiting for the beast to  
spit them out.<sup>21</sup>

These feelings—as expressed by Darwīsh, Turki and others are not unlike those expressed in the Psalms of David during the Hebrews' captivity:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we  
remembered Zion.

By the rivers of Babylon, there lived a Palestinian in exile. His name was Jabrā Ibrahim Jabrā (whose name always resonated in my mind the name of Gibran Kahlil Gibran). Jabrā told us (in a paper entitled "The Palestinian Exile as Writer")<sup>22</sup> that the "Palestinian may still be an exile and a wanderer, but his voice is raised in anger, not in

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<sup>20</sup> Edward W. Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1985), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Fawaz Turki, *Poems From Exile* (Washington, D.C.: Free Palestine Press), 16–17.

<sup>22</sup> Here it may be appropriate to mention that Jabrā wrote this paper upon my request at a time when Hisham Sharabi and I agreed to prepare a special issue of the *Journal of Palestine Studies* on Palestinian society and culture. The project never materialized, but by reading Jabrā's letters to me (including two letters dated October 23, 1978 and November 21, 1978), I was reminded of the episode which I totally forgot. By going back to old issues of the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, I discovered to my amazement that the article mentioned in his letters was indeed published in issue 30 no. 2, vol. 7 (winter 1979): 77–87. The article was reprinted in a collection of works by Jabrā entitled *A Celebration of Life: Essays on Literature and Art* (Baghdad: Dar Al-Ma'mūn, 1988), and in *Jusoor*, no. 7/8, 1996.

lamentations”, and by losing Palestine, he further tells us, Palestinians began to realize they “had confronted a ruthless modern force with an outmoded tradition. Everything had to change. And change had to begin at the base, with a change of vision. A new way of looking at things. A new way of saying things. A new way of approaching and portraying man and the world.”<sup>23</sup>

This sense of loss in exile, according to Jabrā “is a sense of having lost a part of an inner self, a part of an inner essence. An exile feels incomplete even though everything he could want physically were at his fingertips. He is obsessed by the thought that only a return home could do away with such a feeling, end the loss, reintegrate the inner self.”<sup>24</sup> The sense of loss and wandering was both collective and personal, deeply rooted in their dispersal. To demonstrate that each Palestinian was an exile after his own fashion, Jabrā recalls that Tawfiq Ṣāyigh, a poet in exile no matter where he lived, had a famous dictum: “Worse than exile abroad is exile within one’s own homeland”, meaning by homeland the Arab world. The dominant theme of his poetry was alienation in exile. So was the story of his life as told by Jabrā. He died as an exile at Berkeley, California, and was buried there in a vast cemetery, with a Chinese man on his right and a Japanese on his left: a stranger to the bitter end.

What is more closely pertinent to my exploration in exile and creativity is the conversation Jabrā had with Arnold Toynbee in Baghdad back in 1957. Toynbee, Jabrā says in the above paper, likened Palestinian expulsion from their country “to the expulsion by the Turks of Greek thinkers and artists from Byzantium in 1453; these thinkers then spread throughout Europe and were a major factor in ending the European dark ages and bringing about the Renaissance. The Palestinians, he told me, were having the same seminal influence on the Arab world. It was their fate to be the generators of a new age, the heralds of a new civilization. . . . Palestine had released into the world a force of radical change.”<sup>25</sup>

In his introduction to an edited book on Latin American literature of exile, Hans-Bernhard Moeller similarly points out that “Exile

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<sup>23</sup> Jabrā I. Jabrā, “The Palestinian in Exile As Writer,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, issue 30, no. 2, vol. 7 (winter 1979): 82.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

literature is produced during a prolonged separation from one's country by stress of circumstances."<sup>26</sup> This applies both to Palestinians as well as to other Arab migrants to the Americas whether forced to leave their countries or voluntary exiles.

John M. Spalek stated in this edited volume that the general characteristics that cut across national boundaries and are common to all exile literatures include: preponderance of lyric poetry, prolific output of autobiographies, diaries, and autobiographical fiction which dwells on the past and childhood and confrontation with home country. He also speaks of a sort of liberating experience of exile implying the presence of closeness between exile and existential experience of being a stranger. In this sense, exile acts as a precondition of freedom. This in turn is inseparable from the exile's experience of time as a dilemma of living in the past and the present. To this effect, the Spanish writer Francisco Ayala describes the exiled writers as living in parentheses, i.e. between a frequently idealized past and a hope for return imparting their own awareness of time to their characters, and transforming such an experience of time into poetic metaphors.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, encounters or collision with host country may oscillate between the extremes of rejection and acceptance, withdrawal and immersion. In this way, exiled writers may live fragmented lives feeling certain obligations both to their native and host countries and creating their own sub-cultures, pending how much they have in common with adopted country. On the other hand, they may be enriched through the development of a universal vision as in the case of Amīn al-Riḥānī and Gibran in spite of traumatic dislocations.

David Bevan also pointed out in an introduction to an edited book on literature and exile that "both theorists and exiles themselves . . . have long debated whether the experience is predominantly one that invigorates or mutilates. For some, the sense of release, of critical distance, of renewed identity, of fusion or shock of cultures and even of languages, is interpreted as productive, generating a proposition that originality of vision must almost necessarily derive from the transgressing and transcending of frontiers. However, for others, physical displacement means rather rejection, alienation, anguish and,

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<sup>26</sup> Hans-Bernhard Moeller (ed.), *Latin America and the Literature of Exile* (Heidelberg, 1983), 9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

quite possibly, suicide.”<sup>28</sup> But he adds that both Henry James and Joseph Conrad left their countries for England, and “both seem to have adopted British customs and traditions with the peculiar intensity of religious converts”, but then adds that “both remained somewhat ambivalent and unresolved about this decision.”<sup>29</sup>

Having outlined what is meant by exile, I must make a similar attempt at defining literary creativity. Here creativity is defined in terms of an unusual mental and emotional capacity, combined with special talents and strong motivation, to “uncover previously unknown interconnections between things”.<sup>30</sup> In other words, it is something we are not used to seeing and relating to.

C.R. Rogers also defined the creative process as “the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, people, or circumstances of his life on the other”.<sup>31</sup> He further elaborates that “the mainspring of creativity appears to be . . . man’s tendency to actualize himself, to become his potentialities.”<sup>32</sup>

In order to identify some of the basic elements of creativity, reference may be made to Freud’s observation that a “child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him.”<sup>33</sup> He adds that the “creative writer does the same thing as the child at play. He creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, we are told that the motive forces of phantasies are unsatisfied wishes. Hence the relation in his opinion of phantasies to dreams, and the comparison of the imaginative writer with the dreamer in broad daylight, and of creations with day dreams.

Arab writers have their own share of the attempts at defining creativity, which may prove more relevant to my task in exploring the nature of its interrelationship to exile. ‘Abd al-Kabīr al-Khaṭībī argues

<sup>28</sup> David Bevan (ed.), *Literature and Exile* (Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1990), 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Georg Lukacs, *Studies in European Realism* (N.Y.: The Universal Library, 1964), 114.

<sup>31</sup> C.R. Rogers, “Towards a Theory of Creativity,” in E. Vernon (ed.) *Creativity* (Penguin, 1970), 137–151, 139.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>33</sup> S. Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming.” P.E. Vernon (ed.), *Creativity*, 126–135, 126.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

that the question of the Maghribi heritage is very likely to escape those who inhabit it. Hence his call for detachment from the familiar meaning of heritage.<sup>35</sup> Hence also is his resort to memory which represents collective unconsciousness in writing his book *Tattooed Memory (al-Dhākira al-Mawshūma)* and other imaginative works.

Perhaps more relevant to my task here is Khālida Sa'īd's analysis of the relationship between Arab modernity and the crisis of identity as reflected in the creative works of a number of innovative Arab writers. She says that a general survey of Arab texts of modernity reveals personalities that are rebellious, tense, torn between contrasting worlds, disjointed, alienated, intrigued between the sane and the insane, the Godly and the human, the tragic and the comic, the religious and the heretic, the sacred and the falling. . . .<sup>36</sup>

Over a decade earlier, Khālida Sa'īd defined creativity in Gibran's view in the following terms: "Creativity . . . is what constitutes human adventure in search of the unknown, the astonishing, and the unusual. The significance of the Gibranian legacy is its emergence in the midst of stagnation and the dominance of inherited conceptions which perceived of the ideal model in past accomplishments . . . so much so that the creative process was rendered a process of imitation, conformity and memorizing, instead of being an adventurous search and transcendence."<sup>37</sup>

In Gibran she saw one of those protesting revolutionaries who challenged the past, the establishments, and traditional views. He represented the "wind that flows against the current", the "truly visionary" writer whose "contact with universal culture excluded what is mainstream and customary".<sup>38</sup> Almost equally eloquent has been the appraisal of Adonis who stated in his *Muqaddima li l-Shi'r al-'Arabī* that "with Gibran starts in Arabic poetry the vision that aspires to change the world . . . with him . . . starts modern Arabic Poetry . . . Gibran was not only the first reformer in Arabic poetry. In addition, he was the first model for the poet and creative poetry in its modern sense."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Abdelkabir Khatibi, "Al-Maghrib: Ufuqan li l-fikr," *Mawāqif*, no. 32 (Summer 1978): 14.

<sup>36</sup> Khālida Sa'īd, "Al-ḥadātha aw 'iqdat Gilgamesh," *Mawāqif*, nos. 51/52 (Summer/Fall, 1984): 15.

<sup>37</sup> "Naḥwa lā-Nihāya mā," *Mawāqif*, no. 9 (May/June, 1970): 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Adonis, *Muqaddima li l-Shi'r al-'Arabī* (Beirut: Dār al-'Awda, 1979), 79-82.

In short, creativity does not come easy. It requires among the constituent elements open-mindedness, critical analysis, free reflection and search, tolerance and respect for difference, questioning the obvious, confronting historical challenges, cultivating readiness to explore the unknown, the urge of discovery, imaginative and independent thinking, swimming against the current, overcoming restrictive inhibitions, liberation from fears of ambiguity, pluralism, inner directness, future orientation free from the ingrained and inherited frames of references, artistic and moral courage, insistence on the rights of freedom of choice regardless of the anxieties it may bring about, intuition, inspiration, vision, sensitivity, adventurous spirit, openness to new experiences, and social psychological readiness to deal with conflicting facts or views. Creativity comes about freely and naturally through the cultivation rather than the suppression of the restlessness of the heart and mind.

With these definitions of exile and creativity in mind, it becomes clearly obvious why the two notions are perceived in the present study as being intimately interrelated, particularly in the *mahjarī* literature.

Exile proved to be an invigorating force and a source of originality in case of the Arab-American writers. In a previous study of mine on Gibran,<sup>40</sup> I identified in his works several features of what I called then counter-culture and that can be considered in the present context as basic elements of creativity. One of the features I detected in his works was transcendence of traditional dualities that permeated Arab dominant culture such as mind/heart, soul/body, evil/goodness, light/darkness, belief/heresy. Another feature was his depiction of society as being in a state of disequilibrium, struggle, conflicts, contradictions notwithstanding the unity of being. A third feature was demystification of relationships of conquest in family and religion. Finally, he clearly rejected many aspects of the dominant or mainstream culture by exploding the traditional structure of language, and by revolutionizing relations.

Here I would like to make a few additional remarks about Arab emigré writers and their writings as emanating from the new reality they relived and benefited from in North America during the first three decades of the twentieth century.

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<sup>40</sup> Ḥalīm Barakāt, "Jibrān al-mutaṭarrif ḥattā al-Junūn: Buzūgh al-thaqāfa al-muḍāda," *al-Kātib al-ʿArabī*, vol. 1, 1 (October/November, 1981): 53–56.

It seems to me that their creativity stemmed from an unusual mental and emotional ability to combine artistic and rational cultures, a sort of making for intermarriage between mind and free imagination. They did see some contradictions between these two inclinations but they made special efforts to resolve them each in his own peculiar way. They clearly rejected those forms of rationality that restricts free imagination. Instead, they developed an inquisitive and imaginative mind. This is true of Gibran as much as of Amīn al-Riḥānī (migrated to America 1888 at the age of 13), Mīkhā'īl Nu'aymah, and Iliyā Abū Māḍī (migrated to Egypt at 11, and then to the USA in 1911 at the age of 21).

Arab emegré writers did realize and appreciate the fact that they belonged to an ancient and rich culture, but they also knew they must make a break with the past and reorient themselves and the society towards the future. This is clearly demonstrated most significantly in Gibran self-portrayal in "The Forerunner" (1920):

And when you were a silent word  
upon life's quivering lips,  
I too was there, another silent word.

Then life uttered us  
and we came down the years  
throbbing with memories of yesterday  
and with longing for tomorrow,  
for yesterday was death conquered  
and tomorrow was birth pursued.

Social psychological studies tell us that creative intellectuals tend to be introverts rather than extroverts. Generally speaking, it is hypothesized that the more extroverted a person and the more group-centered their daily experiences, the more likely their ideas are to be clichés.<sup>41</sup> Members of the Pen league formed a movement that had a great impact on Arab writings since then, but they worked and thought mainly separately and managed to maintain their individual activities and distinct interests. The distinctive works of Gibran, al-Riḥānī, Nu'aymah, and Abū Māḍī are clear testimony to this effect. What we are talking about here is a special kind of isolation or separateness characterized by inner contemplation rather than self-centeredness.

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<sup>41</sup> Randall Collins, "A Micro-Macro Theory of Intellectual Creativity: The Case of German Idealist Philosophy," *Sociological Theory*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 87): 47–69, 48.

In order not to be misled by the above notion of distinct separateness, the creative explorations of Arab emegré writers may also be explained in terms of their identification with their native country and preoccupation with its social and political crises. Sociology of literature tells us that there is a relationship between creativity and societal crises and transitional periods. Arabic literature and thought prospered in periods of acute national crises which generated an urgent need for the development of a new consciousness and critical analytical thinking and reflection on means of transcendence. One of these periods is early 20th century when *mahjarī* literature asserted itself and contributed towards revolutionizing Arab cultural life. In transitional periods, there emerges an acute awareness of the need for replacing the old meanings and values with new ones so as to revitalize society and ensure its cohesiveness.

Arab emegré writers benefited from the new milieu in which they found themselves. Being exposed to different cultures must have served as a source of creativity. Under certain conditions, encounters with other civilizations may lead to the emergence of a process of cross fertilization which is likely to provide the necessary condition for creative thinking. The continuing attachments of Amīn al-Rīḥānī, Gibran, and Abū Māḍī to their native homeland motivated them to seek greater rather than less desire to know and benefit from the civilization of the host country. Clearly, they felt proud about serving as a bridge between cultures, and combated feeling of being uprooted outsiders to both or either of the two cultures. By doing so and by being in this peculiar position, they enriched both cultures. Cross fertilization among civilizations, as in this case, had its enriching rather than stifling effects on Arab-American writers.

The migration of the *mahjarī* writers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries liberated them from the stifling fears of persecution. They escaped both political and social-cultural repressions. By distancing themselves from the centers of control, they felt secure to express themselves freely. By centers of control I am referring to both the authoritarian state system that prevailed then and continues to prevail now, and the repressive social institutions such as religious and family authorities. By freeing themselves from both political and social systems, they were able to experiment with new forms of writing. In so doing, they managed to achieve their goals and desires not only for themselves but also for their people back home who were equally hungry for freedom. Hence the great lasting impact of *mahjarī* writings

on contemporary Arabic literature. It truly represented the first wave of modernity.

Finally, I would say that the *mahjarī* writers also freed themselves from preoccupation with the every day local details and concerns as well as from the frustrations and communal loyalties in their native country. Instead, they developed universalistic perspectives and addressed themselves to the Arab world at large. Those who remained behind were exposed not only to state control and social and cultural pressures, but also to the temptations of helpless engagements in daily and secondary battles to their own detriment. Gibran and al-Riḥānī and other *mahjarī* writers showed as well a strong tendency toward liberation from the traditional religious habits calling instead for religious tolerance and secularism.

In an elaborate study of the *mahjarī* poetry, Wadīʿ Dīb<sup>42</sup> identified some overlapping or additional distinctive leanings. He detected a special emphasis on the theme of *al-ḥanīn* (nostalgia or yearning). They yearned for the homeland, for family and mother, for simplicity away from modern life (and hence the stress on the theme of return to the *ghāba* or forest), and for the unknown. Another leaning he discovered in their poetry is reflective, poetic and philosophical thinking. They rejected old certainties and raised intriguing questions about all aspects of life experiencing as a result deep anxieties of the heart and mind. Abū Māḍīʿs poem “Ṭalāism” (paradoxes or riddles) is most illustrative of such leaning:

I came—whence, I know not—but I came  
 I saw before me a road, so I walked,  
 and shall continue to walk, whether I will or not  
 How did I come? How did I see my road?  
 I know not

Am I new, or old, in this existence?  
 Am I truly free, or a prisoner in chains?  
 Do I lead myself through my life, or am I led?  
 I wish to know, and yet I know not.

And my road: what is my road?<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Wadīʿ Dīb, *al-Shiʿr al-ʿArabī fī al-Maḥjar Al-Amrīkī* (Arabic Poetry in the Americas) (Beirut: Dār al-Riḥānī, n.d.).

<sup>43</sup> Translated by Mounah A. Khouri and Hamid Algar, *An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 35.

Dīb also identified a third sort of a leaning in *mahjarī* poetry which reflected deep desire for liberation from all restrictions on their freedom including linguistic norms. This is particularly true of Gibran who saw the poet as being first and foremost responsible for language and its destiny. Hence what I mentioned earlier about his determination to explode the traditional structure of Arabic language and adopting the dictum, “you have your own language, and I have my own.”

Similarly, Rose Ghuraib points out that the movement of *mahjarī* literature “revolted against all aspects of the prevailing literary and social conditions in Arab countries, and called for the destruction and the recreation of the new, and laid the foundation for comprehensive unprecedented deep rooted revolution in the Arab World.”<sup>44</sup>

It is these characteristics and others which prompted the noted literary critic Muḥammad Mandūr to raise and address the question as to why the *mahjarī* writers succeeded in doing what other writers could not do. No wonder then that another noted Egyptian writer Muḥammed Ḥusayn Haykal would warn his fellow writers, “The reformer and the traditionalist among us should cooperate. Otherwise the victory will remain on the side of the Americanized Syrians, and Islamic culture would be erased.”<sup>45</sup> While Arab writers in exile yearned for homeland and its people, traditional writers in the Arab world yearned for the past.

What the *mahjarī* writers succeeded in doing is pursuing the path of creativity rather than uniformity. For them creativity, inseparable from agonizing exile, became their way of life sustained with constantly renewed hopes for return. Gibran expressed it well in saying:

And hence an exile am I, and an exile I  
shall remain until death lifts me up  
and bears me even unto my country.<sup>46</sup>

At a testimonial dinner for Gibran, January 5th, 1929, Philip Hitti commented: “The influence which Gibran exercises in modern Arabic literature can be measured . . . not only by the multitude of people

<sup>44</sup> Rose Ghuraib, “Udabā’ al-Mahjar,” in *Maṣādir al-Thaqāfa fī Lubnān* (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān, 1969), 101.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in *Ilḥyā Abū Mādī: Shā’ir al-Mahjar al-Akbar* (Dār al-Yaqāza al-‘Arabiyya, 1963), 23.

<sup>46</sup> *The Two Voices of Kahlil Gibran* (Beirut: Creative, 1984), 27, from *The Tempests*, translated by Andrew Ghareeb.

who have . . . benefited by reading him but also by the big crop of would-be Gibrans, quasi-Gibrans and Gibran imitators who have in recent years, mushroom-like, sprung up and flourished all over the Arabic speaking world. So much so that you can hardly nowadays pick up an Arabic paper printed in Beirut, Cairo, Baghdad, Sao Paulo or Buenos Aires without finding somebody consciously trying to write Gibran-like. . . . through his unmatched mastery of this art, through his pure and rich imagery, through his lofty and noble idealism . . . he has become the father of a new school of thought all of his own."<sup>47</sup>

By bearing the symbols of the homeland, *mahjarī* writers gave exile in marriage to creativity as they gave the sea in marriage to the sun. Arab writers produced their best works in the Abbasid period, in Andalusia, and in the *mahjar* where exile served as a precondition of freedom. In all these instances, there coexisted meaningful encounters of civilizations and liberation from both political and social repressive authorities. Hence the possibilities of innovative explorations and pondering transcendental themes leading to the creation of vanguardist works in each of these periods of Arab literary history.

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<sup>47</sup> From *The Arabs in America, 1492-1977*, compiled and edited by Beverlee Turner Mehdi, Dobbs Ferry (New York, Oceana Publications, 1978), 87.

GIBRAN AND THE AMERICAN LITERARY CANON:  
THE PROBLEM OF *THE PROPHET*<sup>1</sup>

IRFAN SHAHĪD

Celebrated six years ago was the hundredth anniversary of the arrival at these American shores of Gibran Kahlil Gibran, the foremost Arab-American writer.<sup>2</sup> Twenty-eight years after his advent in 1895, a slim volume of his, less than a hundred pages, which could be read in an hour, appeared in print titled *The Prophet*.<sup>3</sup> It received a wide and immediate vogue and its popularity has not waned in the course of the last eight decades or so since its publication. The sale of the book ran into the millions, more than eight according to the most reliable estimate.<sup>4</sup> Thus, *The Prophet* outsold all American poets from Whitman to Eliot. According to its publisher, Alfred Knopf, the book's success was entirely due to its own appeal since no publicity whatsoever has ever been mounted to promote its sale. In addition to the sale of these millions of copies, the book has been translated into all major and some minor languages of the world, according to some estimates into fifty.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, Gibran is the only Arab or Arabic-speaking author who succeeded in authoring a book that has had this extensive presence in the four corners of the earth. Although he was by birth a Lebanese Arabic-speaking writer,

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper delivered at the Library of Congress Arab-American Cultural Relations Conference, September 1995 and is published by permission of the Library of Congress, granted on the 23rd of July, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> The bibliography on Gibran is extensive and is still growing. See Fawzi Abdulrazzak, "Adab al-Mahjar: Bibliyūgrāfiyyah," *Mundus Arabicus I* (Cambridge, 1981): 89–230; for studies in English and other Western Languages, see Francine H. McNulty, *ibid.*, 65–88 and Jean Gibran and Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World* (New York: Interlink Books, 1974, reprint 1991), 446–451.

<sup>3</sup> Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1923).

<sup>4</sup> This figure was supplied by Alfred Knopf's publicity department on May 24, 1991. I am grateful to my student David Marcus at Georgetown for making the inquiry.

<sup>5</sup> See the article of the scholar whom this *Festschrift* honors, "The Contributions of Arab Immigrants in North America to Arabic Literature," *The First One Hundred Years: A Centennial Anthology Celebrating Antiochian Orthodoxy in North America*, ed. George S. Corey, et al. (Englewood, N.J.: Antakya Press, 1995), 86.

he spent almost three-quarters of his short life on earth in America,<sup>6</sup> where he wrote his masterpiece *The Prophet*, not in Arabic his mother tongue, but in English, the language of the country of which he became a naturalized citizen, amid the challenges of the American scene, and where the millions of copies have sold and are still being sold; and it was an American writer that fifty translators or so deemed worthy of rendition into their respective languages. And yet this book, the reputation of which has become truly global as an American classic, has been snubbed by the Grove of Akademe in the United States.

The Ivy League universities do not teach him as an American author, let alone as a classic; he has never been allowed admission to the Canon and his place is neither in the "Grove, nor in the Garden, nor in the Stoa, nor in the Tub," but is in the Agora, to which he is consigned or ostracized, by the umpires of literary taste in the Establishment. Even the most American of all philosophies, namely Pragmatism, has not been applied to him: the philosophy that judges the truth of any system by its success and how it works in practice; and that, on the strength of the millions of copies sold, should have elevated him to a higher level of literary standing. Not only has he been banished from the Canon and from university syllabi, but also from standard anthologies of American literature. The latest and the most prestigious, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, does not include him.<sup>7</sup> And this is not a slim anthology, but one that consists of two thick volumes, a work of some five thousand pages, without a single page from Gibran, while it includes works, the Americanism of which are perhaps not as strong as that of Gibran's *The Prophet*. José Martí was a distinguished Cuban writer; although he lived in America for a short time, yet he wrote in Spanish and his *Neustra América* is included and so are a number of *corridos*, Spanish Mexican ballads or songs all translated from Spanish. The process of banishing Gibran from the mainstream of American literature or even

<sup>6</sup> Born in 1883 and died in 1931.

<sup>7</sup> *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. Heath and Company, 1994), vol. I–II. For *Nuestra América*, that challenging and remarkable essay, see vol. II, 821–828; for the *corridos*, 828–845. My colleagues in the Spanish Department at Georgetown tell me that *Neustra América* was originally written in Spanish. The non-inclusion of Gibran, or at least a selection from his writings is truly surprising, especially as this anthology is known for its multi-cultural inclusions, reflecting the ethnic diversity of America; cf. the inclusion of FitzGerald in his entirety in another anthology; infra n. 19.

consciousness is reflected also in his non-inclusion in *The Dictionary of American Biography*, *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, and *Who's Who in America*.<sup>8</sup>

Surely this is a genuine, not a fictitious, problem or question and it has bearing on the life of the Arab-American community—its cultural identity and its place in the multi-ethnic society in America to which it also belongs. The problem has relevance to the concept of *émigré* and comparative literature in general. In fact it invites comparison with one of the most outstanding examples of the success of an *émigré* writer, Joseph Conrad, the Pole, who was given a warm embrace by the English Establishment, thus contrasting with the cold shoulder given Gibran by the American.

This article is divided into two parts: in the first, will be examined whatever legitimate reasons the Establishment has against *The Prophet*; in the second, the case will be stated for the inclusion of Gibran, if not in the hallowed Canon, at least in anthologies of American Literature. The cases of three literary artists who attained world-wide celebrity also will be examined because of their relevance to the problem of *The Prophet*, namely, Frederik Nietzsche, Edward FitzGerald, and T.S. Eliot.

## I

The reservations or the objections of the Establishment might run along the following lines:

1. *The Prophet* does not admit of a satisfactory categorization in terms of recognized literary genres or representation of a well-known school. It is neither a novel nor a short story nor a long poem. This conception of *The Prophet* and how it operates to the disadvantage of its author, Gibran, becomes clearer when Gibran is contrasted with another countryman of his, a Lebanese who was accepted immediately by the French Literary Establishment, George Schehadé. By composing in the idiom of the surrealists, he became one of the best representatives of surrealism in modern French literature and almost won the Nobel Prize.

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<sup>8</sup> Strange enough, the Gibran who is included in "Who's Who" is his namesake, his relative, the sculptor who nowadays lives in Boston and who with his wife Jean co-authored the book on Gibran, cited supra, n. 2.

2. It is probably because of this, that *The Prophet* in the imagination of the professional literary critic tends to belong to the category of religious literature, which conception assigns its author to the status of a religious leader or more pejoratively to an Oriental guru rather than a man-of-letters. His acceptance, especially in religious circles such as the Unitarians, the Friends, and the Baha'is seems to confirm the judgement of the literary critic as to the regions to which *The Prophet* belongs. The very title of the book suggests or corroborates this impression as well as the various chapters of the book, which sound as sermonettes delivered from a pulpit. That this must have been the case is supported by the fact that *The Prophet* in bookshops is not to be found in the section on literature, but in that of religion. The best confirmation of this view was, however, the adaptation of *The Prophet* as a religious drama which was presented as such, almost annually at a Christian church in New York, St. Mark's in-the-Bouwerie, the pastor of which, Dr. William Norman Guthrie, christened another book of Gibran's, *Jesus The Son of Man*, as the "Gospel according to Gibran," thus making of Gibran the fifth Evangelist!<sup>9</sup>

3. In the Inter-War period, beginning with the twenties, the literary world for a long time to come was in the grip of T.S. Eliot, who, both as poet and critic, revolutionized first English and then world poetry and also created the taste by which the new poetry was to be appreciated. Almost everything he did, and especially his *Waste Land*, the most influential poem of the twentieth century, published a year before *The Prophet* must have disinclined the critics of the Establishment from considering Gibran seriously:

a – Eliot carried an implacable war against the Romantics, accusing them of sentimentality and lack of precision in poetic expression. Gibran was irretrievably a Romantic, and the critics who were speaking the new idiom of Eliot had no use for the Gibranic romanticism, especially coming as it did from an outsider, whose very name advertized his otherness.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> On this, see Barbara Young, *This Man from Lebanon* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1950), 33. In spite of the fire that Barbara Young's book has been under, it does have valuable data on Gibran, owed only to her.

<sup>10</sup> Gibran himself apparently was aware of this when he chose "Gibran" rather than "Jubran" as the more aesthetic rendition of his name in English. He also transliterated his middle name not "Khalil," but "Kahlil." More confusion was contributed by Antione Karam when he transliterated his name as "Djabrān" in the new edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam!*

b – Eliot effected a revolution in the language of English poetry, which, according to him, had become stale and unexciting after the long night of the Romantics and the Victorians; and in the judgement of critics, a great poet is one that develops the powers of expression inherent in a language. Gibran could hardly be considered an innovator in this sense. The revolution in poetic diction he effected was in Arabic,<sup>11</sup> not in English, and his language in *The Prophet* could not have been considered innovative and revolutionary as that of Eliot. On the contrary, it brought coal to Newcastle, Biblical rhythms and phrases that could only have further distanced Gibran from the American critic, already indisposed for other reasons toward Gibran, the gate-crasher on the American literary scene.

c – Thirdly, Eliot insisted that poets should avoid engaging in direct statements. Poetry should be allusive and suggestive or oblique. But *The Prophet* consists of pronouncements almost all of which violate these recommendations. They are direct statements that plummet most of the time to the level of downright didacticism, and the reader could feel that he was being sermonized by Gibran, who speaks with the assurance that he had the “True Gospel.”

So much for the Establishment and for Eliot as the nemesis of Gibran.

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In addition to what has just been said, there also is the fact that the American literary critic in his dismissive attitude to the author of *The Prophet* hardly knows anything about Gibran—the real Gibran, who was the foremost literary figure of Arabic literature in America, who revolutionized the course of Arabic literature in the Arab homeland, and who is still alive today in the consciousness of Arab men-of-letters and of avid readers even after a hundred years, thus illustrating Ezra Pound’s famous dictum that “literature is news that stays news.” If the American critic knew the real Gibran, his attitude would change or may change. Because then, he would realize that he is dealing with a true literary artist and *The Prophet*, whatever its limitations, is a work of literary art in the strictest sense of *belles-lettres*. But unfortunately, the gulf is difficult to bridge. The

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<sup>11</sup> For this see the long chapter by Salma K. Jayyusi in *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), Vol. I, 91–107 and her short “Forward” (unpaginated) in Jean and Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran*.

Arabic works of Gibran are not open to the inspection of the American literary critic and no FitzGerald has yet appeared to render the Arabic works of Gibran into English as that Anglo-Irishman had done for Omar Khayyam.

## II

All the arguments of the American literary critic can be rebutted or at least faced with counter-arguments, despite the fact that there is an element of truth in them, which, however, is not such as to relegate Gibran to the limbo to which he has been consigned.

1. Categorization: this lays Nietzsche himself open to the same objection because *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in spite of the difference in the outlook of Gibran and Nietzsche, is akin to *The Prophet* as the work of a German preaching to his countrymen what Gibran was to do in *The Prophet*. And yet no one has objected to the form in which Nietzsche cast his thought and no critic to my knowledge has on that score refused *Thus Spake Zarathustra* admittance to the German Canon, where it has rightly rested as one of the glories of German, indeed, European literature.

As to its being a work more related to religious literature, especially of the Orient, rather than a secular work of art, the same may be said of one of the major works of English literature, namely, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and yet no one condemned it on that score. When Eliot opened fire against Milton, it was not on that ground that he did so. Eliot himself ended up almost speaking from the pulpit of the Anglo-Catholic church, and no one found his conversion or its literary expression exceptionable.

The charge against Gibran of being romantic in the pejorative, dismissive sense is the easiest charge to rebut. Notwithstanding the prestige of the great poet/critic who advanced it, the Romantics are one of the classics of English and other European literature. Eliot's psyche may not have had a place for romanticism, but his was a strange and complex one, perhaps even morbid, and his *Waste Land*, the most celebrated poem of the century, was written while he was in a hospital in Switzerland, recuperating from a nervous breakdown. But the overwhelming majority of human beings are romantics, at least at a certain stage in their lives. Hence Romantic poetry is not factitious, contrived poetry, but one that answers to deeply seated

human needs and drives. It is unfortunate that sometimes it degenerates into mere sentimentalism that robs it of all emotional robustness, even manliness, as when one of its best representatives, none other than Shelley, says, "I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed." But this line is not representative and the "Ode to the West Wind" remains one of the gems in the treasury of English verse.

As to Gibran's failure to effect a revolution in the language through which he wrote *The Prophet*, this is a true observation. But it should not so count against him as to deny him recognition as an American writer. Few are the poets who can be credited with this achievement. It was done by the Romantic Wordsworth and he announced it in the introduction to his *Lyrical Ballads*, but English poetry had to wait for another century or so until Eliot appeared and effected a second revolution in the language of English poetry, with Whitman as a precursor. Between the two, all the Romantic and Victorian poets in England were writing in the same idiom that was bequeathed to them by the Romantics, and so they cannot be denied their place in the gallery of English poetry because they wrote in the idiom fashioned by their predecessors. Besides, English was not Gibran's native language, and as has already been said, he did effect a revolution in Arabic; so it is extravagant to expect him to effect a second revolution in another language, especially as the circumstances of his life were not conducive to that. For most of his life, which was relatively short, he consorted with his fellow Arab writers, and had no American wife, which would have ensured greater immersion in English. And it was only in the last decade of his life that he wrote his English works, of which *The Prophet* was one. Yet the English of *The Prophet* is attractive in its own way with its Biblical flavor, and can be appreciated for its effectiveness in employing a Biblical style, adapted to the taste of twentieth-century America.

2. A more fundamental reply to the indifference of the Establishment to Gibran may be the realization that the Canon itself is "a construct, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time."<sup>12</sup> Such is the considered judgement of a distinguished

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<sup>12</sup> See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 11. I should like to thank my colleague, Professor John Hirsch of the English Department for some fruitful conversations on how the American Canon was formed in the forties and fifties, on the factors that governed its formation, and how the two Columbia anthologies of those days reflected it.

literary theorist, Terry Eagleton, and there is an element of truth in this. Aesthetic judgements tend to be subjective, governed by a variety of non-literary elements or factors that go into their formulation. Many are the works of art, literary, plastic, or musical, that have been condemned when they first appeared, were later recognized as masterpieces, and vice versa; many that have been acclaimed and hailed ended up in critical oblivion. This is not an attempt to discredit aesthetics and the impressive conceptual apparatus that philosophers, initially Germans, who have worked out its details. It is only to say that there are cases when the Canon may be said not to be infallible and that in the case of Gibran's *The Prophet*, many were the non-literary elements that entered into the process of evaluation and that resulted in its exclusion from the American heritage fold. Before I come to these non-literary factors and present three cases which by contrast illuminate these factors, I should like to refer to some authors who have been impressed by *The Prophet*. The most often quoted is Claude Bragdon and his judgement appears on the jacket of copies of *The Prophet*. It reads as follows:

His power came from some great reservoir of spiritual life, else it could not have been so universal and potent, but the majesty and beauty of the language with which he clothed it were all his own.

This evaluation apparently did not do Gibran much good in sophisticated literary circles and it may have done some harm in that it could convey to them the impression that *The Prophet* found no patrons to endorse its literary quality and advertize it on the jacket other than one who was not a member of the Establishment, but who was known more as an architect than as a *bona fide* literary critic.<sup>13</sup> Gibran's admirers, however, were not limited to Claude Bragdon. None other than George William Russell, a major figure in twentieth century Irish literature, to whom the *Dictionary of National Biography* gives space almost equal to what is given to James Joyce, grew lyrical when he remembered *The Prophet*. Here are samples from his chapter on Gibran:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For some insightful comments on Gibran, see his chapter titled "A Modern Prophet from Lebanon," *Merry Players* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1929), 139–147.

<sup>14</sup> See George William Russell (also known as "AE.") in *The Living Torch* (London: MacMillan, 1937), 168–169.

Kahlil Gibran as well as Tagore has expressed the mystical faith of Asia . . . I do not think the East has spoken with so beautiful a voice since the *Gitanjali*<sup>15</sup> of Rabindranath Tagore as in *The Prophet* of Kahlil Gibran, who is artist as well as poet. I have not seen for years a book more beautiful in thought, and when reading it I understand better than ever before, what Socrates meant in the *Banquet* when he spoke of the beauty of thought, which exercises a deeper enchantment than the beauty of form . . . I could quote from every page and from every page I could find some beautiful and liberating thought . . . I wonder has the East many more poets to reveal to us? . . . It is only when a voice comes from India or China or Arabia that we get the thrill of strangeness from the beauty, and we feel that it might inspire another of the great passions of humanity.

George William Russell had no reason to flatter Gibran, and he was a fastidious critic possessed of an independent judgement and certainly was not playing to the gallery. Some may say that his admiration was derived from the fact that he saw in Gibran a kindred spirit, in view of his interest in theosophy and oriental thought, but so was Goethe, the foremost German poet, who was deeply interested in the Orient, but this never militated against accepting his literary judgements; furthermore, Russell did have strong reservations about other oriental literary figures, so he was a discriminating critic who approached Gibran without any of the prejudices of the critics who denounced Gibran or damned him with faint praise.<sup>16</sup>

So much then for arguments and counter-arguments. Now it is time that the non-literary elements or even factors that worked against Gibran and his acceptance by the literary Establishment are addressed. These were disadvantages that plagued him: a poor emigrant, who hardly spoke any English when he landed in America at the tender age of 12 and who lived in the Chinatown of Boston; he had no formal education, college or university, other than a biennium in school, when he went back to ground himself in his own native language in Beirut. His intimate friends were his own Lebanese and Syrian *literati*<sup>17</sup> who formed the literary circle called al-Rābiṭa al-Qalamiyya, and not well-known established American men of letters

<sup>15</sup> The poems that won Tagore the Nobel Prize in 1913.

<sup>16</sup> Such as Stefan Kanfer; see *The New York Times Magazine* (June 25, 1972): 8ff. I have been unable to find anything about Kanfer's background or identity.

<sup>17</sup> For these colleagues of Gibran in al-Rābiṭa (literally The Pen Bond), see the attractive chapter with vivid vignettes of its members in Mikha'il Naimy (Mikhā'il Na'ima), *Sab'un* (Beirut, 1964), vol. II, 163–175. On al-Rābiṭa as the literary circle of the Arab-American writers, see Cornelis Nijland in "Al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya: An

and literary critics. Finally, he did not belong to an ethnic group in America that had been well established in this country and that had discovered its cultural identity, let alone contributed to the cultural life of America. If this had been the case, Gibran might have had the support of such a community and his image in the American literary mirror might have been clearer and better. That these disadvantages under which he labored were partly responsible for the cool or tepid reception which he received, or even were mostly responsible for the indifference of the literary Establishment to *The Prophet*, will become crystal clear when works of three European literary artists are discussed, artists who had all the advantages he was denied, advantages that were partly responsible for their success and popularity: Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, FitzGerald's *Rubāiyāt*, and Eliot's *Waste Land*, and all three are related in one way or another to Gibran's *The Prophet*.

1. Reference has already been made to Nietzsche and how no critic found it exceptionable that he cast his thought in the form of a monologue, put in the mouth of the Oriental Persian Prophet, Zoroaster. Unlike Gibran, Nietzsche had every advantage of birth and education. Appointed to a professorship at the university of Basle while he was still an undergraduate, he taught classical philology there and so he belonged to the elitist German academic community, among whom the classicists were the aristocrats. He could count among his friends Wagner and Schopenhauer. And it was from his professorial chair at Basle that he began quite early in life his literary activity as a man of letters and a philosopher, thus contrasting with Gibran, who alternated between Chinatown in Boston and a modest studio in Greenwich Village in New York.

2. Even more relevant and telling is the case of FitzGerald and the *Rubāiyāt*. FitzGerald studied at Cambridge where he met the novelist Thackeray and through him, Alfred Tennyson, the future poet laureate, and later Carlyle. So he, too, moved in the circle of the Establishment from the very beginning of his career. Even so, his translation of the *Rubāiyāt*, the quatrains of a medieval Oriental poet, received no attention from the reading public; and the publisher, who had advertised it for one shilling per copy, sold not a

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Arabic Literary Circle in New York," *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 50, nos. 3-4 (1993): 329-341. The life span of this literary circle ran for eleven years, from 1920 until 1931 when Gibran died and with him al-Rābiṭa.

single one for two years, 1859–1861. When he reduced the price to one penny and put the pile of unsold copies in a bargain box outside his shop, it was bought accidentally by one, Whitley Stokes by name, who gave it to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who in turn brought it to the attention of Browning and Swineburne, and from these it reached Meredith and finally Ruskin. And it was thus, with the “blessing of the Pre-Raphaelites” that the popularity of the *Rubāiyāt* was launched, through the endorsement of powerful critics and distinguished Victorian poets.<sup>18</sup> It was also in this way that the *Rubāiyāt* received a new lease on life this side of the Atlantic, when a powerful and influential critic, none other than Charles Eliot Norton, who from his professorial niche at Harvard gave his blessing and ensured its popularity in America.<sup>19</sup> Since then Omar and FitzGerald have become household words in the English-speaking world and many a phrase from the *Rubāiyāt* have become part and parcel of the English language such as “I came like water and like wind I go,” or “The moving finger writes and having writ, moves on.”<sup>20</sup>

3. Finally, there are Eliot and his *Waste Land*, published one year before *The Prophet*, and like *The Prophet*, a slim volume of some four hundred verses. It became the most influential English poem in this century and even in the world, in spite of the fact that the poem has no independent existence since it is unintelligible without the notes which the author thought necessary to append, the curious medley of languages used in it, and the difficulty of following the argument even with the help of the annotation. Although the poem’s

<sup>18</sup> On this, see Dick Davis, *Edward FitzGerald: Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyām* (Penguin, 1989), 40, and indeed the whole valuable introduction (pages 1–41), the most recent on the *Rubāiyāt*.

<sup>19</sup> In a long article which appeared in October 1869 in the *North American Review*, see also A.J. Arberry, *The Romance of the Rubāiyāt* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), 26, where the author quotes the enthusiastic passage from Norton’s article that welcomed FitzGerald into the American literary scene. The memory of Charles Eliot Norton is still alive today perpetuated by an Endowed Chair at Harvard University, which carries his name and with it the *Rubāiyāt* he was the first to acclaim in this country. For a detailed study of the *Rubāiyāt* as the classic of all translations, see the present writer in his Inaugural Lecture, “Omar Khayyām: The Philosopher-Poet of Medieval Islam” (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> Noteworthy is the fact that not a selection from the *Rubāiyāt*, but the entire one hundred and one are included in works that are supposed to be *anthologies*, and this, in spite of the possibility of a selective presentation of them, since each quatrain is a self-contained unit of composition; see *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York: W. Norton and Company, 1968), Vol. II, 1179–1190; cf. *supra*, n. 6.

power is undeniable, yet its immediate and wide appeal is partly owed to many extra non-literary factors that raised it to the pedestal upon which it has now rested for decades and that has kept it firmly in the good graces of elitist literary critics. A quick enumeration will reveal the operation of these factors and currents, all of which contrast stridently with those that ran against Gibran. Eliot was born into an aristocratic family, a member of which had founded Washington University in St. Louis. He himself went to the leading school in the country—Harvard University—where he did his graduate work toward a Doctorate on the philosopher F.H. Bradley. As if Harvard were not enough, he moved then to the Sorbonne in Paris and thence to Oxford. Thus he studied at the three major universities of the Western world, moving in distinguished academic and literary circles, making acquaintanceships and friendships with everybody who was anybody in literature, among whom suffice it to mention the Cambridge Philosopher Bertrand Russell and E.R. Dodds, the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, both of whom remembered Eliot in their writings, thus lending the prestige of their paramount place in Oxbridge academia to the reputation of the American poet. Like Gibran, Eliot was an emigrant from his country, who left the United States, settled in England, took British citizenship and became an Anglo-Catholic, thoroughly identifying himself with the *ethos* of the “Sceptered Isle” and writing on the English scene works such as the martyrdom of Thomas Becket in his *Murder in the Cathedral*. Consequently, Eliot was wholeheartedly accepted by the English literary Establishment and this acceptance was reflected posthumously in a plaque for him, placed in that crowded precinct, the Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey. All this contrasts with Gibran’s place in American society where he remained an outsider, who had no strong affiliations or connections with academic or literary circles that mattered. No Ezra Pound in America endorsed his writings as Eliot’s masterpiece *Waste Land* was, dedicated to *il miglior fabbro*, Pound, whose imprimatur of that poem launched it into that extraordinary course of unrelieved success and into that altitude from which it has never descended.

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Perhaps the foregoing paragraphs have not failed to suggest, even indicate, that Gibran has not been treated fairly as an American writer. *The Prophet* may not be an American classic such as Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* or Eliot’s *Waste Land*, but it should have a place at

least in an American Heritage Anthology and be given a chance of being seriously considered by sophisticated literary taste in America. The East, more specifically the Near East, has contributed three classics to the Western World, that are, moreover, among the most widely read in Europe and America: the *Bible*, *The Arabian Nights*, and the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. If *The Prophet* cannot be placed on the same pedestal as these three classics, it should not be too distant from the last, the *Rubaiyat*, and it is distinguished from the three by being not a translation, but a work of literary art composed not in Hebrew, Syriac, Greek, Arabic, or Persian, but in the language of the country, English. And so it should be in the company of those books that are the contribution of the Near East, in this case the Arab Near East, to the American literary scene. This is not a call for the application of Affirmative Action to the literary arena, only a gentle reminder to the American critic to overcome nonchalance or indifference.

Those of us who are not guiltless of Arabic and who read Gibran's work in that language know that he is a genuine literary artist who, moreover, was truly inspired by more than one Muse.<sup>21</sup> So when he chose to write in the language of his adopted country, he was and remained the same artist, but writing in a different linguistic medium, which in the considered judgement of fair and disinterested critics he had mastered. The American critic, innocent of Arabic and Gibran's Arabic works, is faced with the problem of accepting a work, that is, *The Prophet*, which stands in splendid isolation, severed from all the background reading in Arabic, necessary for convincing the critic that he is dealing with a writer of sterling value. One way of bridging this gulf, or to start the dialogue that has not begun, is to have better translations of his Arabic works into English by those for whom translation is not a mechanical process, but an art. It is extravagant to expect that any one of these potential translators will be another FitzGerald, but hopefully, they will be within measurable distance from him. Even if this happens, it will not be the end of the encounter of the American critic with Gibran. That critic must evaluate *The Prophet* on its own merits. It will only be the

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<sup>21</sup> Gibran was an artist as well as a man of letters and his model was William Blake. He painted and drew and was also a well-known portraitist. Some famous personalities of the time sat for him, such as the poets Yeats, al-Bahā', Masfield and Rabindranath Tagore.

beginning of the dialogue when, in approaching *The Prophet*, this hypothetical critic will be relieved of an attitude to *The Prophet*, that had condemned it without appeal as being unworthy of even being considered.<sup>22</sup> The most that one can hope for is that he will approach it with an open mind without any preconceived ideas. Then and only then will the American literary critic realize or may realize that in dealing with Gibran, he is dealing with one of the true literary voices of the twentieth century, who represents the contribution of the Arab community in these United States to the American literary heritage.

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<sup>22</sup> A step in the right direction has been taken by Eugene P. Nassar. See his chapter on Gibran in "Cultural Discontinuity in the Works of Kahlil Gibran," in *Essays Critical and Meta-critical* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1983), 84-102.

# THE COLLAPSE OF TOTALIZING DISCOURSE AND THE RISE OF MARGINALIZED/MINORITY DISCOURSES<sup>1</sup>

KAMAL ABU-DEEB

*To the memory of Sa'dallāh Wannūs: visionary, tragic figure and friend, for seeing the light before the end of the tunnel.*

## I

### 1. *Some Introductory Observations*

Over the past two decades, radical transformations have been taking place in creative activity in the Arab world. This applies particularly to poetry and fiction (including drama and the short story), but is also manifested in other modes of expression such as intellectual discourse and the plastic arts. The changes have coincided historically with what might be called “the crisis of ideology and authority” in Arab cultural and political life. The great ideological projects of the fifties and sixties reached a point at which they appeared to have lost their appeal to large sections of society; such dreams as the nationalist, socialist and secularist ones have been said to have failed to fulfill the great expectations which they had been thought to be capable of fulfilling; a sense of disillusionment and loss began to dominate Arabic discourse in its various forms. Political Islam, as some scholars have called it, began to emerge as a major new force in cultural and political life. The great cultural project of *ḥadātha* (roughly but not identically, *modernism*), in the arts and literature generally, which had anticipated and accompanied the political and social projects, began to enter a critical phase. Some of its leading exponents began to talk about the end of *ḥadātha*. Simul-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a larger research project on “Culture Between Fragmentation and Multiplicity: A Comparative Approach.” The project is supported by a major research grant from the Leverhulme Trust in London. I would like to thank the trustees for offering this grant. I would also like to thank my research assistant, Dr. Nawwar al-Hassan, for her scholarly contribution to this paper.

taneously, new bearings in artistic expression have been crystallizing. A more personal, anti-ideological or non-ideological art, an art evolving outside the space of consensus, has been taking shape and acquiring prominence.

In order to give this introduction a more concrete dimension, I should like to quote a number of examples which can be treated as manifestations of what I have been calling fragmentation and possibly as indicating a process of multiplicity. The fragmentation in the examples below takes shape on two distinct but closely related levels: one is conceptual and intellectual, explicitly revealing an awareness of fragmentation; the other is more subtle, taking shape on the level of the language, structure and imagery of the texts. The examples are taken from both fiction and poetry:

#### A. *Fiction*

A very illuminating example of what I am trying to describe here is Ḥalīm Barakāt's latest novel, *Inana wa l-Nahr*; the following passage is particularly significant:

In the past, the joyful celebration of the 'īd (the festival of the Virgin) was a single, unified project. People would form a ring around a single group of dancers of *dabkeh*, women and men, old and young dancing to the rhythms of the drum, the flute and the double flute. Anybody who wished to participate in the dancing and singing would do so; those who just wanted to look on would do so, all doing what they wanted without trouble or disturbances. In those days, 'Ādil S'ādeh became prominent with his extraordinary strength, stunning beauty, the face always flowing with smiles and his great artistic performances of the *dabkeh* and the sword-and-shield dance, until he was treacherously attacked with a dagger by 'Afīf al-Wādī. The stab was almost fatal, but 'Ādil, with his immense power and ability, overcame death and recovered his strength. . . . In these celebrations of the 'īd of the Virgin, the name of Murshid al-Sa'dī also became famous; Murshid was so skillful as a singer, a composer of *zajal* (popular poetry in the colloquial), a verse competitor and player of the double-flute . . . Then death struck the first star and the second no longer showed up in the celebrations of the 'īd, due to illness—or so it was reported. . . . After all these transformations, and when the two stars of the celebrations who used to unify the people of the village in a single, homogenous, solidly-cemented mass, had disappeared, the state of affairs grew increasingly worse year by year. Each group now had its own party, drum, flute, heroes and *qabaḍāyāt* (teddy-boys) and its own stars who would find more and more different ways of performing the *dabkeh* and singing. Because of the proliferation of groups and the limited space within

which the celebrations could take place, the various tunes began to get entangled and jumbled up, and to corrupt one another; so much so that it was no longer possible to dance to a single tune and a single rhythm; therefore they invented new dances which would to some extent fit the mixture and jumble of the tunes and rhythms. A witty commentator, who took interest in politics, compared the state of affairs to that of the Arabs in these wretched times.<sup>2</sup>

## B. Poetry

### B.1 Maḥmūd Darwīsh:

A knight stabs his brother in the chest  
in the name of the homeland  
and prays for forgiveness.<sup>3</sup>

B.2 Early in the seventies, a young poet wrote: “He had walked towards his eyes but never arrived.”<sup>4</sup> The self was just beginning to experience what was to become a remarkable process of SPLITTING. Quite consciously, a language of division has come to be employed by poets portraying the self as being split into two or more. A sort of schizophrenia proclaimed by the “unified” self of the schizophrenic. Here is Adonis suffering this fate:

Here I am as Jāsim moves further . . .  
my body separates itself from me  
and my head hurries to catch up with it.  
My senses travel and are almost ahead of me  
And here is my voice almost  
emanating from the larynx of the wind.  
“I am still walking behind the child  
who continues to walk in my limbs”.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, one of the finest expressions of this process of splitting comes from Adonis in his great poem “The Time”:

What is it that separates myself from myself?  
What is it that negates me, eradicates me?  
I am a cross-road

<sup>2</sup> *Inana wa l-Nahr* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1995), 149–150.

<sup>3</sup> *Hiṣār li Madā’ih al-Baḥr*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-‘Awda, 1985), 136.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Mulḥim, “Mashā Tawīlan Naḥwa ‘Aynayhi wa lam Yaṣīl,” *Mawāqif*, nos. 17–18 (December 1971): 95.

<sup>5</sup> *Iḥtiḡā’an bi l-Ashyā’ al-Ghāmiḡa al-Wāḡiḡa* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1988), 70–71, 57.

and my path is no longer my path  
 at the moment of revelation?  
 Am I more than one person, my history is  
 the cliff of my fall  
 and my rendezvous is my fire?  
 What is that rising in a giggle that rises  
 from my suffocating limbs?  
 Am I more than one person, each asking the other:  
 Who are you? And where from?  
 Are my limbs forests of war  
 in a blood which is a wind  
 and a body which is a leaf?<sup>6</sup>

2.

Ten important aspects of reality may be said to have been connected, in one way or another, with the collapse of consensus and the intensification of fragmentation in the social and political spaces:

1. The attitudes to Israel (war, peace, the status quo).
2. The conflicts within the Palestinian resistance movement and between the Palestinian movement and some Arab regimes.
3. The fragmentation on the social level, especially the class structure; the intensification of "educated unemployment" and "masquerading unemployment"; the emergence of consumer society and the widening gap between the rich and the poor, particularly after the oil price explosions in the seventies.
4. The rivalry between the center (Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, Cairo) and the peripheries (the Gulf states, Arab North Africa) for leadership and political influence as well as over the role of the West's leading agent/partner in the region, and the rivalries between the countries of each of the two main spaces, center and peripheries, amongst themselves.
5. The Lebanese civil war and its repercussions in the wider Arab and regional contexts.
6. The rising tide of, and attitudes to "political Islam" and the so-called "Islamic fundamentalism."
7. The Gulf war and the fragmentation of Iraq.
8. The conflict between local nationalisms, regionalism, pan-Arabism, Arab nationalism, and Islamic "nationalism."

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<sup>6</sup> *Kūtab al-Hiṣār* (Beirut, Dar al-Ādāb, 1985), 13.

9. The powerful "Unitarian" ideologies which have dominated political systems in most Arab countries and the concomitant oppression and negation of the "other" in all spheres of activity.
10. The emergence of minority and marginalized-groups consciousness in all its forms: from ethnically based (e.g., Kurds, Berbers, Assyrians) to gender-motivated (women, men) to sectarian oriented (Copts, Maronites, Shiites, Sunnis); all of these have generated new discourses.

3.

In some of my writings, in English and Arabic, I have tried over the past decade to capture some of the essential properties of these changes and transformations. In a paper written in late 1984, I suggested that a process of *fragmentation* had begun to dominate Arab cultural and political life and to produce marked effects on the *structure* of literary texts. Not only had the enunciating "I," and the self of the subject generally, begun to fragment, but texts themselves had begun to show signs of fragmentation in their actual construction and design; a multiplicity of voices began to appear in poetic and fictional texts; a multiplicity of narrators also began to emerge. A language of possibilities, uncertainty, alternatives and contradictions sprang up. Most significantly, the notion of unity began to lose credibility: literary texts which had in the previous decades been shaped by a conscious desire to achieve what the Romantics (e.g. Samuel Taylor Coleridge) had called "Organic Unity"<sup>7</sup> began to show signs of discarding the notion of unity altogether. I also suggested that this process would go on and intensify over the following decade (1985–1995). Its intensification together with the collapse of consensus and the sense of totality and organic wholeness would, it was further argued, lead to the emergence of new conditions within which writing will sever its intimate involvement in ideology and its close links with political authority and begin to explore wholly new spaces of human experience and man's presence in the world. All of this

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, early statements made by two leading modernists on the importance of organic unity for modern poetry in Adonis, *Ṣamān al-Shi'r* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1972), 45–46 and Unsī al-Hājj, introduction to *Lan*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: al-Muʿassasa al-Jāmiʿiyya, 1982), 16–18; first edition was published in 1960.

would inspire rich, though fundamentally different modes of writing and cultural creation. Much of what has happened since has tended to demonstrate the validity of those predictions. More recently, I have argued that a new aesthetic appears to be taking shape, which I have called *The Aesthetics of Contiguity*.<sup>8</sup> Some aspects of this new aesthetic can be described in terms similar to those used by many Western critics today to describe *postmodernist* writing. Other aspects cannot.

## II

### 4.

Two possible ways of theorizing what has been happening present themselves: to conceive of this as a process of *fragmentation* which will lead to the collapse of all notions of center, unity, cohesion, harmony as well as oneness and singularity; or to see it as an emergence of a spirit and vision of *multiplicity* and a renunciation of singularity and monotheistic ideologies. Both of these conceptions have been suggested in my earlier work as ways of handling the processes and transformations. There appear to be two *fundamentally contradictory* forces operating in/upon the culture and the literary output it has been generating. The future of Arab culture, indeed of Arab society itself, might well be determined by how the contradictions between these two forces are resolved or whether or not they get resolved.

Furthermore, a rather fascinating theoretical possibility needs to be examined at length: that the collapse of totalizing ideologies and “grand narratives,” as Lyotard calls them, and the crumbling of unifying theories, both in the West and in the Arab world, are connected to the proliferation and coming to prominence of marginalized discourse and minority consciousness. For instance, the remarkable spread of interest in feminist writings, especially in the Arab world, occurs in the context of a total loss of faith in unifying, comprehensive, totalizing projects of modernization, modernity and eman-

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<sup>8</sup> Especially in my *In Celebration of Difference* (London: SOAS Publications, 1995), and *Jamāliyyat al-Tajāwur aw Tashābuk al-Fadā'āt al-Ibdā'iyya* (Beirut: Dār al-'Ilm li l-Malāyīn, 1997).

icipation on the higher level of *society as a whole*. It appears now possible to argue that one of the few issues which bring together the disillusioned modernizing forces in Arabic culture, after the collapse of much else, is the issue of women: the feminist movement has gathered strength as everything else has withered away. It appears to be a *marginal, fragment-like substitute*, in the face of bleak realities, for the total project of modernity which began to take shape some eight decades ago and of which the emancipation of women had itself been an integral, but totally subordinate, aspect. At the same time, the immediate rise of feminism and marginalized discourse has further intensified the process of fragmentation on the overall political, social and cultural levels. Yet, from a different perspective, such processes can be seen as creating a richer space in which multiplicity dislodges singularity, helping thus to explore and actualize previously undreamed of possibilities.

Looking at these issues in a comparative perspective introduces a further degree of complexity. Some major writers in European and American criticism, sociology of culture and cultural theory have identified a process of fragmentation in the West; their interpretations of the socio-political, economic, cultural and even psychological conditions within which fragmentation appears to have taken place give the hypothesis a new dimension. A strong current of thought in such writings (e.g. the works of Hassan, Said, Jameson in America; the Germans Benjamin, Adorno and Habermas; Goldmann, Lyotard, Bourdieu and Baudrillard in France; Williams, Eagleton in Britain; feminist criticism in all of these countries) relates fragmentation to a much more general condition which has been called by a lot of critics, "the postmodern condition" and in some cases to the rise of "Reaganism" and "Thatcherism." Its manifestations outside the confined space of "artistic" production in the narrow sense of the word include currents of critical analysis which give prominence to such notions as deconstruction (Derrida) and epistemological discontinuity (Foucault). This raises the intriguing question of whether basic features and constituent elements of a *postmodern age* which are thought to be the product of highly technological, post-industrial, late capitalist societies can make their appearance in a pre-industrial, pre-capitalist society which has hardly been touched by technology and high capitalism. Should the answer to this question be in the affirmative, a totally new debate could be generated and a search for a new set of criteria on an international scale would become

imperative. Some deeply enshrined notions about the “organic” nature of literary forms and intellectual processes and their rootedness in specific, particularly economic, conditions would have to be reassessed. While notions of discontinuity, rupture, historical in-determinism might come to be seen in a new light. In such a climate of inquiry, many doctrines current in literary theory and cultural studies may find themselves facing a critical test and some associated theories in the social and political worlds may also have to be reexamined with a greater degree of skepticism.

### III

#### 5. *Contemplating the Project of Ḥadātha*

The project of *ḥadātha*, as I personally understand *ḥadātha*,<sup>9</sup> can be dated back to the writings of Jubrān Khalīl Jubrān (or Kahlīl Gibran, as he is better known in the West) and to the language and mystical, revolutionary impulse of his *Prophet*, *Forerunner* and *Jesus the Son of Man*. Jubrān’s prophet was to multiply and-to use today’s explosive language of genetics—be cloned by many writers over the past sixty years. Adonis’s Mihiyār, different from the Prophet though he is, remains deeply affiliated to his tone, idiom and vision of man and his universe. So are other mystical, revolutionary characters who derived from, or were based explicitly on, other historical or mythic figures such as Tammuz, Adonis the Greek, ‘Alī, al-Ḥallāj, al-Suhrawardī or ‘Urwa b. al-Ward and Ṭarafa b. al-‘Abd, the pre-Islamic poets. The entire trend which has mistakenly been labeled “Romantic” by those who viewed it from a Eurocentric perspective, was the forerunner of, and constituted the initial step toward, the formation of a new, revolutionary project which has been associated with the vocabulary and notions of *ḥadātha*, and was called at times “*ḥadāth*,” at times “*jadīd*” before settling down to become known specifically as “*ḥadāthī*.”

The *ḥadāthī* project aspired to change the world, politically, socially, culturally, linguistically, and on all other levels. Here is a glimpse of what Adonis has embarked on and of the manner in which he has

<sup>9</sup> It will be useful here to consult my “al-Ḥadātha, al-Sulṭa, al-Naṣṣ,” *Fuṣūl*, vol. iv, no. 3 (Cairo, 1984).

formulated his notion of *ḥadātha* as a goal for Arabic culture and Arab society.

What, then, is the truth of *ḥadātha*?

On the revolutionary level, *ḥadātha* means the emergence of new movements, theories and ideas, and new institutions and systems/regimes which leads to the disappearance of old, conventional structures in society and the rise of new structures.

On the artistic level, *ḥadātha* means a radical questioning which explores poetic language to the fullest, and the opening of new, experimental horizons in the practice of writing, and the invention of modes of expression which befit that questioning. The condition for all this is to issue forth from a personal, unique view of man and the universe.

... *ḥadātha* is fundamentally a new vision, which is in essence a vision of questioning and protest: questioning concerning the possible and protest against the dominant and current. The moment of modernity is a moment of tension, i.e., contradiction, opposition and clashing, between the dominant structures in society and the requirements of its deep motion of change as to the structures which respond to this motion and are appropriate for it.<sup>10</sup>

I should note here that this is a moderate statement which modifies earlier, more fiery pronouncements on the meaning of *ḥadātha* expressed especially in *Ẓaman al-Shiʿr* (The Time of Poetry, 1972): “This poetry-revolution is the poetry of dynamic motion and change and transcendence, the poetry of total reality which will cause our dead age to splinter and crumble in order for a new age to be born.”<sup>11</sup> Similar statements are to be found in the works of, amongst others, Yūsuf al-Khāl, Unsī al-Ḥājj and Khālida Saʿīd.

### 5.1

By definition, the *ḥadāthī* quest for modernity involved an attitude to the past, the present and the future. It was not merely a Romantic dream of a transcendental time to come. In a paper of mine on Adonis’s critical writings, I summed it all in the title phrase, “The Burden of History and the Lust to Invent the World”. Underlying the search for modernity was a sense of the past as a corpse, a burden, a wasteland which needed blowing up and gutting down; not necessarily in order to destroy it in its entirety, but in order to

<sup>10</sup> *Fāṭiha li Nihāyāt al-Qarn* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1980), 320–321.

<sup>11</sup> *Ẓaman al-Shiʿr*, 62.

refashion and reforge it, assimilating the dimensions of creativity to be found in it into a new history, a history which can extend into the future and help shape it as a glorious time of fulfillment. Needless to say, this was a highly *political* endeavor, and a very explosive one for that matter: for the past could not be conceived without its most salient constituents: Islam and the Arabic literary and intellectual traditions, which had to varying degrees acquired the status of the sacred and had become inextricably entwined into one another for hundreds of years.

## 5.2

In essence, the *ḥadāthī* project was a rupture, a break with the ancient visions of the world, with “the structures of feelings”, as Raymond Williams would call them,<sup>12</sup> or “the epistemological structures”, as I have called them,<sup>13</sup> which had dominated Arab history and shaped the Arab present. This is a logical extension of the notions that lie at the very heart of modernity. Modernity, according to Octavio Paz<sup>14</sup> and many other prominent figures, identifies the forward motion of time with progress. In this sense, it rejects the tribal/traditional notion that the motion of time embodies a constant distancing of reality from the sources of purity and perfection, i.e., from the golden age. In *qadāma* (ancientness, antiquity, old times), the motion of time is perceived as an intensifying flow towards further and greater corruption. Modernity thus places itself in direct opposition to the very fundamental conceptions of time entertained by religious and traditional societies; as such it nourishes a new political and social order and enters into direct confrontation with all forms of organization based on a religious world view.

The *ḥadāthī* project was first and foremost a total project which developed its distinctive, totalizing discourse; it carried the seeds for a secular vision of history and reality, for a vision of the human endeavor as progress towards an infinitely more exciting and freer

<sup>12</sup> A phrase described by Edward Said as “seminal”; Said also uses “the structures of attitude and reference.” See *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), especially 60–62.

<sup>13</sup> In “al-Wāḥid/al-Muta‘addid: al-Bunya al-Ma‘rifiyya wa l-‘Alāqa bayn al-Naṣṣ wa l-‘Ālam,” in *Fuṣūl*, vol. 15, no. 2 (summer 1996).

<sup>14</sup> See especially his *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-garde* (trans. by Rachel Phillips) (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, 1974).

existence forged by man and free from divine intervention. It was fundamentally a rebellion against the authority of ideals, models, perfect times of achievement, final and absolute truth, which all resided in a bygone past. And at the heart of this project was a replacement of the spirit of acceptance and glorification of the past by one of inquiry, questioning, search, longing, restlessness, anxiety and skepticism. Notions of rejection dominated the heydays of the modernist project;<sup>15</sup> images of journeying, sailing, adventuring into the unknown and returning with treasures and rejuvenating energies, proliferated. Sindbad the sailor became a vital symbol, explored most poignantly by Khalīl Ḥawī, Yūsuf al-Khāl and Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr. But all this was experienced with a powerful recognition that nothing could be achieved without a price: blood and fire and suffering. Thus, Adonis talked of “green thunderbolts”, of “beautiful destruction” (which was awaited but failed to come), of the redeeming fire of the Phoenix burning itself and rising anew from its ashes; and he embodied all this in his “Resurrection and Ashes”, a long, symphonic poem which captured the rhythm and spirit of the period. Christ, al-Ḥusayn, ‘Alī, al-Ḥallāj and other figures of suffering and martyrdom became dominant symbols of sacrifice and redemption. At times, these mythic and/or historical figures were, explicitly or implicitly, fused with the figure of one political leader or another, most commonly with Jamal ‘Abd al-Nassir, the towering political leader of this entire period.

### 5.3

Furthermore, the *hadāthī* project was a critical project; its impact on Arab society and cultural output has been immense. One of the most significant aspects of that impact was the transformation of *literary* criticism into *cultural* critique: criticism of the social order, of political practice, of the structures of authority, religious thought, history, language, the position of women, gender politics, and all else. One can describe what happened in two different ways: the rather conventional way of talking in terms of change, transformation and development, and the Foucauldian way adopted by Muhammad Bennis, of talking of replacement and substitution. In these latter terms, structures do not develop and undergo change or transformation;

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<sup>15</sup> And they recur in the latest volume of poetry by Adonis, although they have faded away in most other recent writings.

they die and are replaced by new structures; the choice of one set of terms and concepts rather than another to depict what happened in Arab society and culture involves a cultural vision, a political position, an attitude to history, development, organicity, unity, severance and rupture. However, this is not the most appropriate place to try and settle such a debate; it had better be left for another occasion.

As a critical endeavor, the *ḥadāthī* project operated on three different but closely connected levels: criticism of the culture from within; resistance to external invasion as embodied specifically in Israel's occupation of Palestine; and resistance to imperialism and Western hegemony. Each of these levels deserves close attention, but time does not permit me to offer more than outlines of the first of them.

On the internal level, perhaps the critique of culture and authority is the most significant aspect of the political dimension of *ḥadāthī* writing; in particular, the quest for freedom, the critique of religious thought and the exploration of gender politics have been especially significant. Such works as those of Adonis, Ṣādiq al-ʿAẓm, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and ʿAzīz al-ʿAẓmah are of particular relevance with reference to the first two spheres. The poetry of Muḥammad al-Māghūṭ is highly significant as far as the quest for freedom is concerned. Gender politics has its own heroines, amongst whom one would undoubtedly need to mention Nawāl al-Saʿdāwī, Khālida Saʿīd, Fāṭima al-Mernīsī and fiction writers like Collette Khouiri, Laylā Baʿlabakkī, Ghāda al-Sammān and, more recently, Ḥanān al-Shaykh and Salwā Bakr.

#### 5.4

If we combine the traits of the *ḥadāthī* project as outlined above, putting together, say, Adonis's view of *ḥadātha* as creating new structures and destroying old ones, and the view of *ḥadātha* as rupture, critique, transcendence of old visions, advocacy of secularism, we can easily see that the quest for modernity by necessity carried within it the seeds for fragmentation. It carried the seeds of destruction of a world which appeared to have been unified by history, religion and language, by a sense of identity solidly Islamic or more specifically Arabo-Islamic, by acceptance of reality as bequeathed by earlier epochs.<sup>16</sup> With the emergence of the *ḥadāthī* sensibility, a world of

<sup>16</sup> Or so is the picture we have inherited of the state of affairs in the Arab world prior to the emergence of the quest for modernity. This picture might be inaccu-

consensus came into violent clash with new, critically different forces which were driven powerfully and specifically by a desire to shatter the established order and traditional consensus, to overthrow the wisdom of the community (*jamā'a/umma*) and institute a new role for individual visions. And the *hadāthī* drive shattered the consensus, interjecting new visions of reality, of time, God, man, society, politics, economics, science, morality as well as language and literature themselves. The *hadāthī* project was, then, by definition a powerful force in bringing about the fragmentation which I am trying to explore here. However, the project itself constituted a largely unified ideological and political structure. This is not to say that it was homogeneous; it wasn't. It is to say that for a number of decades there appeared to be forces of change and modernization in the Arab world whose ideologies had enough in common for them to generate a collective project with a high degree of consensus concerning certain fundamental goals and strategies.

### 5.5

But the *hadāthī* project was not without its own contradictions and shortcomings: four such items are of central importance for my present analysis: first, it produced a totalizing discourse which sought to interpret the world in terms of identity, modernity, secularism and nationalism and, very often, socialism, and it was utterly certain and confident in the absolute validity of its premises. Progress had a Western model and we had to emulate that model to become modern. While it rejected all internal models derived from the past, it did not question the validity of the external model it had set its sight on; nor did it subject that model to the same critique to which it subjected its own past; second, it became too deeply enmeshed, in fact it got caught up in, the demands of dominant ideology, and it allied itself too closely in some instances and some quarters with political authority; third, it failed to carry out a fundamental challenge to religious thought and specifically to Islam; fourth, it had very little, if any, awareness of the dangers and evils latent in the

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rate but at this point in time our means of demonstrating its inaccuracy are extremely limited. We need a great deal of research to challenge this dominant conception of reality as articulated by the early modernists. In fact, the accuracy or lack of it becomes irrelevant; what is more vital is that generations of creative figures conceived of reality in these terms, influenced no doubt by their confrontation with, and consciousness of the cultures of the invading West.

politics of identity. These shortcomings played a major role in the collapse and fragmentation of the entire project of *ḥadātha* and in bringing to a tragic curve “the struggle of the modern,” to borrow a well known phrase from Stephen Spender.<sup>17</sup>

#### 6. *The Crisis of Ḥadātha*

The crisis of ideology—which by necessity and mostly for the reasons I have just mentioned generated a crisis within the modernist project itself—began to intensify in the mid-seventies; a state of doubt, anxiety and bewilderment began to replace the tone of utter certainty and faith that had dominated the earlier decades. But the most significant transformation has been the collapse of totalizing discourses and the rise of marginalized/minority discourses. In the previous decades, marginal identities were, or appeared to be, dissolved within a totalizing, larger, singular identity: Arab, socialist, anti-imperialist, secular, some would even say, revolutionary. As this identity began to crumble, marginalized/minority voices began to make themselves heard. Up to that turning point, one could not legitimately talk about a Kurdish literary output, a ‘Alawite poetic discourse, a Christian accent in writing. Nor could one justifiably talk of a distinctive feminist voice, an autonomous feminist literature. Regionalism had been a liable accusation; no serious intellectual would have defended the notion of a Jordanian national identity or a Saudi national literature, or a national history of Umm al-Quwain. Social groups such as peasants, workers, Bedouins, etc., did not enunciate distinct literary accents. Now all this and much more is happening; more significantly, it is acquiring legitimacy and popular support. Of the variety of marginalized/minority discourses that have emerged rather forcefully, I shall consider two distinct trends: one involving ethnic-cultural differences of identity, the other involving gender politics. The first I shall illuminate with a brief account of aspects of the work of Salīm Barakāt; the second with aspects of works by a number of male and female writers, produced over the past ten years. In no way do I claim to be presenting an exhaustive analysis of any of the works or the writers I shall be mentioning; my discussion is strictly confined to what is most relevant to this paper.

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<sup>17</sup> The phrase forms the title of Spender’s book, *The Struggle of the Modern* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963).

### 6.1 *Salīm Barakāt and the Rise of a Kurdish Literary Discourse*

The most remarkable quality of Salim Barakāt's work is the decisive act of exclusion, or rather, *counter exclusion*, it performs. Arabic writing had totally and completely ignored the presence of a Kurdish cultural space in the Arab world; in Syria, no writer that I know of showed the slightest degree of awareness of the Kurds forming a distinct ethnic and cultural space while depicting the "Syrian" experience. Or, if such awareness existed, it was of a very limited nature and was confined to noting some figures of Kurdish origin who had contributed to the public life of the country. In the face of such exclusion, Salīm Barakāt writes, for instance, *Fuqaha' al-Ḥalām* (The Faqihs of Darkness),<sup>18</sup> which creates an autonomous, indeed fully independent, Kurdish space severely delimited and chopped off the space of Syria as a geographic and political unit and inhabited totally by Kurds, as though other Syrians did not exist. One or two very minor references are made to the Arabic language, but only by way of negating it, and to Syria under the French, but only to serve a very specific purpose within the Kurdish space. Apart from that, the novel applies a process of counter exclusion, presenting the consciousness of its characters as being totally free of anything connected with Syria as a country which they share with a dominant majority of Arabs. In particular, it cleanses them of anything that can be interpreted on the cultural level as emanating from, or belonging to, a specifically "Arab" or "national" culture. It might appear ironic that Barakāt does all this through the use of the *Arabic* language; he himself writes no Kurdish. But this is far from ironic, I think; the use of the language of the oppressor, so to speak, is analogous to the use by the colonized of the language of the colonizer. Franz Fanon, Edward Said and many post-colonial critics have explored the significance of this phenomenon, and many of the points they raise appear to apply in the case of Barakāt.

But Barakāt's work has significance in a comparative context far beyond the use of language. The very severe act of counter-exclusion it performs represents, in my view, one of the most widespread acts in literature by which marginalized/minority discourses come to assert their presence and carve a space for themselves within the wider cultural context in which they take shape. It is my feeling that

<sup>18</sup> Published by Dār al-Nahār, Beirut, 1986.

Black writers, for instance, perform such an act in the United States and Britain, producing texts which form exclusive spaces inhabited entirely by Blacks. Other minority/marginalized writers often employ the same technique or, indeed, strategy. Tony Morrison's *Jazz* is a fine example of such a strategy. So is Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*.

## 6.2 *The Politics of Feminist Writings*

The rise of feminist discourse in the Arab world is too complex a phenomenon to try and deal with here; but on one specific level it is of immediate concern for the purposes of this study: its relation to the overall modernist project and its changing fortunes.

Undoubtedly, the advancement in education and the changing educational patterns of the fifties and sixties have helped to produce a generation of women writers in the seventies and eighties and they continue to do so now. Further, the blossoming of "revolutionary" ideologies in those countries which incorporated the "liberation" of women into their social and political programs has been instrumental in opening closed doors for women and facilitating their participation in public life. Even in conservative regions, women have made great strides as far as education is concerned, even where they remained restricted in their social and political roles. In many ways, women have repeated the expanding movement of an earlier wave of male writers who had emerged due to the transformation of the educational systems; it is significant that many women writers nowadays come from the countryside, whereas most earlier writers came from the richer strata of the city. Yet, the most significant aspect of the rise of feminist writing is undoubtedly the shift which has occurred within women's discourse and the historical conjunction between this shift and the collapse of totalizing ideologies, the liberation of cultural activity—and literary production in particular—from the demands, constraints and values of ideology and authority, and the return of the subjective, personal tone or voice to Arabic writing. A straightforward comparison between *Sabriyya*<sup>19</sup> a novel by the Syrian Ulfat al-Idlibī (published in 1980 but dealing with the period of the French occupation of Syria and the war of liberation there by a writer who grew up in those years—she was born in 1912) and *Hajar al-Dahik*

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<sup>19</sup> Published by the Ministry of Culture, Damascus, 1980. See also the English translation of Peter Clark, *Sabriyya: Damascus Bitter Sweet* (London: Quartet Books, 1995).

(*Stone of Laughter*)<sup>20</sup> by the Lebanese Huda Barakāt (b. 1945), which explores various issues in the context of the civil war in Lebanon, is sufficient to illuminate the aforementioned shift: from concern with the position of women as an organic part of the collective, national drive for change, modernization, the advancement of society as a whole and the release of various energies in a harmonious project, to focusing on feminist issues which relate more specifically to a feminist viewpoint and perspective, quite outside any collective project or aspirations. At this point of conjunction in time, a new space became available to women writers, especially novelists and poets. I am suggesting rather bravely that women's writing has made its finest contribution to, or rather has only been capable of participating fully in, the creation of a literary scene dominated by personal issues and individualist voices. Of interest is the fact that from Nāzik al-Malā'ika onwards, a certain line connects much writing by women. In the age of social realism not a single woman made an impact with her fiction or poetry (there are simply no women Najīb Maḥfūz or Ḥannā Mīneh anywhere in Arabic writing today, but there is definitely at least one female Nizār Qabbānī), but with the flourishing of neo-Romantic and nascent postmodernist trends, many women writers have come to prominence. As significantly, not a single woman writer has yet made an impact as a dramatist, drama being first and foremost the art of objectification and externalization and the absence of the explicit lyrical, or explicitly personal voice, but countless women have written poetry; the number of women writing prose poetry now far exceeds anything that had been experienced in the past few centuries. I am not qualified to interpret this phenomenon, I have been courageous enough to even point it out.

The rise of feminist writing, coupled with the intensifying interest in feminist issues, might be explained from a specific angle: that of its position within, or outside and in relation to, the overall modernist project and the socio-political, cultural and creative factors which are responsible for its emergence. In order to do that, I shall consider briefly the latest play by Sa'dallāh Wannūs and the latest novel by Ḥalīm Barakāt before touching on a couple of works by women writers.

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<sup>20</sup> London-Beirut: Riyad al-Rayyes Books, 1983.

### 6.3 *Saʿdallāh Wannūs*

Nothing epitomizes the rise and transformation of feminist discourse more poignantly than the rise and transformation of the female/feminist heroine in Wannūs's work. Highly ideological and intentionally political throughout his career, Wannūs, in a sudden, and for him unprecedented, fashion veers into the world of the female/feminist heroine. In his earlier works, women were shadowy figures, subordinate and subordinated to the overall ideological structure of the plays; however, in *Tuqūs al-Ishārāt wa l-Taḥawwulāt*,<sup>21</sup> center stage gets occupied by a female figure. This comes abruptly and from outside the main plot as it has developed up to then. It is as though the female was interposed and interjected into the plot; from then on, she plays a major role, a role that is no longer subordinate to the plot; in fact, it creates its own course and runs side by side with other tales being told; the female has subverted the course of the play and imposed herself and her intimate and distinctively feminist issues onto it. In other words, she has not transformed the plot into a new organic whole within which she is central, she has shattered the plot and created parallel stories, as if to say that her course is independent of, and not organically related to, the overall structure; rather, it is a course which diverts, subverts and abolishes the collective project to create a substitute for it. The female here is not simply a woman; she is a feminist interlocutor, a new rising challenge to the male-dominated order of things; she speaks a language that is incomprehensible to that order; she instigates rebellion within the community of women and threatens to subvert the entire structure of authority, status and position within the city. Even more importantly, she changes the causes around which the conflicts and struggles revolve.

The transformation of the female into feminist and the splits and fissures this creates are in my view an embodiment of the transformation of the female figure and her discourse, on the one hand, and of Wannūs himself, on the other. Here, the collective story crumbles and an individual heroine emerges. Years ago, I pointed out in an essay, and suggested to Wannūs personally, that his play *al-Fil yā Malik al-Ẓamān*, was split by a paradox: while it appears to assert that the group, the organized masses, is the only force of change

<sup>21</sup> Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1994.

and challenge to patriarchy and its abuse of authority, it in reality demonstrates that the group fails the individual hero and causes his and its defeat. It seems to me that many years later, Wannūs has come to recognize this and has produced a text within which the individual steals the show from the group and subverts the course of action the group initiates; significantly, that individual is a feminist heroine.

Yet, the play is even more pregnant with significance than this. In the hands of the director Niḍāl al-Ashqar, a highly political figure who grew up as a member of the SSNP and remains a leading figure within it, the feminist role is even more protruding and is pushed to its ultimate point: the play closes with the woman dying while proclaiming her victory with the words: “Şafwān, I am a tale, and a tale cannot be killed. I am a preoccupation and a longing and a temptation, and daggers cannot kill preoccupation and longing and temptation . . . my tale will blossom now like the orchards of al-Ghūṭa after a rainy winter. Almāsah is growing and growing.” The scene, however, is rather ambiguous; as her brother attacks her, she offers no resistance; indeed, she appears to pull the hand carrying the dagger to stab her body and cause her own death; through her act she raises the banner of feminist struggle even higher and proclaims its survival, as she deprives the male attacker of his sense of fulfillment and his initiation into manhood which is a powerful impulse behind his act—and frustrates his drive for revenge for the tarnished honor of the male community, thus subverting and aborting his authority and sense of power. Moreover, her actions totally overshadow the series of other contiguous actions in the play. It is as though the feminist heroine has consecrated her space and extended it to occupy and contain the entire geography of the play.

In summary, in Wannūs’s play, the collective, political narrative does not take off; it begins but is soon subverted; the narrative is fragmented into a stream of tales with little connection to the original political one; of these tales, the narrative of the rising feminist heroine is the most powerful and the one which dominates the course of the play and offers its explosive and complex closing scene. This fragmentation of the collective narrative of a city permits the rise of a more powerful, feminist narrative as well as other marginalized/minority narratives such as that of the mystic, the homosexual, the passionate lover, etc. It also heightens the supremacy of the body and the power of lust in opposition to the cerebral discourse and

“ideology” of established morality and the social order. All these narratives now exist contiguously, side by side, and do not attempt to fuse or be integrated within a unified whole. The contiguity is masterfully articulated in al-Ashqar’s production by placing the tales physically next to one another and allowing them to run simultaneously on the stage, rather than directing them as linear, consecutive scenes as the text actually arranges them. Furthermore, the director places different levels of language and dialects contiguously and further subverts the text which is composed in the same uniform linguistic medium: standard written Arabic. The female director thus furthers the subversion of the text of the male author, just as the female heroine subverts the lines of development of his original plot. All this happens at the expense of, and by fragmenting the totalizing discourse, intellectually, linguistically and dramatically.

In subverting and dislocating the collective narrative of the totalizing project and totalizing discourse, the feminist narrative acts in an analogous fashion to that of the colonized, for decades mute and represented by the colonizer, suddenly uttering his/her own story with his/her own voice; and in order to be able to do so, she has no choice but to dislodge the colonizer’s narrative physically from upon the stage—in a literal sense in this case—and impose herself and her own story and character on the whole of the stage, leaving no room for the discourse and character of her previous presenter. Wannūs and al-Ashqar and the rising feminist heroine have thus completely eclipsed the falling narrative and figure of the previously dominant male. Even the *male author*, Wannūs himself, is dislodged by *the feminist director* who drives his narrative onto a more explicitly and powerfully feminist trajectory, stripping him of the power of the creator over his text and his characters.

Having talked of Wannūs’s work in terms of transformation, let me point out the significance and importance of the title of his play, “The Rites of Allusions and Transformations”. I have no doubt that the very title suggests a high degree of awareness on Wannūs’s part of the process of transformation within the social order, the writing process and indeed his own world as a creative writer and a social being. Wannūs’s language and tales in this work, and particularly the rites performed throughout it, are far more suggestive and symbolic, far less explicit, than they are in any of his previous works. It is as though he was intimating to us that he has a sense of the fundamental transformations he has been undergoing as he prepares

to enter death;<sup>22</sup> but he only intimates and makes allusions; he states nothing in his former, explicit, politically-oriented manner. Furthermore, the play appears to be to a large extent a stream of rites of initiation into a new world, both within the space of writing and the imagination and within that space of the imagination which is beyond all spaces: death.

The course constituted by the rise and transformations of the feminist heroine, first at the hands of Wannūs, then even further at the hands of al-Ashqar, outlines the trajectory of the rise of feminist writings and issues in relation to the collective project, as perceived by the modernist imagination. There is a strong element of subversion, dislocation and substitution; both men and women participate in its making. The case of Wannūs is almost identical to that of Ḥalīm Barakāt, and their model is reproduced in the works of many male writers; needless to say it represents the core of writings by women now and leaves its traces on all aspects of the rising feminist discourse and its transformations which are far from complete; it is impossible to predict how far they will go. Will the next feminist novel in Arabic project a truly post-modernist feminist vision of gender politics that competes in its extreme perceptions and preoccupations with those current in the work of, say, Camille Paglia? I anticipate that it will. But where will it come from, and when? Nobody can predict.

#### 6.4 *Ḥalīm Barakāt*

In Ḥalīm Barakāt's novel, *Inana wa l-Nahr*, the problematic I have been exploring is brilliantly embodied in a number of intriguing ways: from the implicit, symbolically suggested to the explicitly stated. The novel is dominated by the power and visionary yearnings of two female characters: two that in fact come into one: Inana the ancient goddess of fate, creativity, beauty, and Iman, the incarnation of Inana in present-day reality: the former is deeply rooted in history, in fertility and power, the latter possesses the power of her faith in the future and the inevitability of conflict for a better future to become possible: the female thus embodies the continuity of history, of the quest for life and renewal, of fertility and power, but she also embodies the inevitability of tearing things apart, destruction,

<sup>22</sup> Sa'dallāh Wannūs died only weeks after these passages were written.

rebellion against inherited ideologies and assigned positions and roles. She is the past, the present and the future: the new Inana struggles in order to preserve the purity of the river, the very physical embodiment of the eternal fertility and life-giving forces of nature: she identifies herself completely with the river. This identification is intriguing: for on the one hand it is an identification with the power of creation of the female earth and nature, and sexual flow of the male river. On a different level, the novel is dominated by the mythical tones and language, the power of statement of the divine female and the everyday struggle the female goes through against the domination of the father and the male: the army officer suitor. Most significantly, the novel is fully aware of the state of affairs of the nation, and it laments the collapse of the dream and the national project, but the real issues that it preoccupies itself with are particularized: they dislodge the national, grand issues and substitute for them one issue: the fate and conflicts and struggles of the female. They, in other words, desert the grand narrative and reject the temptation to be part of it in order to narrate a particularized and localized individual tale in its place. And most significantly, the only positive achievement throughout the novel, the only sense of a future, of progression, of hope, emanates from the struggle of Inana to attain education and to be free. While everything else crumbles, her goal, her quest, appears to be solidly and fully meaningful and rewarding.

Undoubtedly, a liberal imagination is the source of the narrative, but it is an imagination which has shifted its focus from the collective, social, national project to the feminist project. In this sense, a process of substitution, may be even of sublimation, is taking place: the feminist struggle outstrips the national struggle as a center of attention and a source for inspiration and enthusiasm, a source of meaningfulness in a world of absurdity and loss of meaning; it is still endowed with meaning at a time when the national struggle has become hollow and devoid of all meaning, as it has been lost in corruption and divisions and defeats. The liberal imagination finds more than solace in the feminist quest: it finds something new to hang on to, indeed to adopt, advocate and struggle for in the place of the collapsed national project of resurrection, advancement, freedom, modernity and unity.

Thus, two excellent examples of awareness of the fragmentation of the collective project and the conjunction of its collapse with the rising interest in feminist issues are provided by Wannūs and Barakāt

in two different ways: Barakāt articulates his awareness theoretically, then proceeds to construct a narrative which highlights the emergence of feminist issues; Wannūs does not articulate his awareness theoretically; he constructs a plot which revolves around the collective existence of the city and the political and, so to speak, national issues confronting it, but his narrative is suddenly subverted and its course is changed by the introduction of the role of the feminist liberator. In these two modes, we have two powerful instances of some of the ways in which literary texts politicize issues and manifest the politics of writing: either through the structure, its transformations and ruptures or through a mixture of theoretical formulations and narrative and dramatic techniques.

6.5 *Ḥanān al-Shaykh: the fragmentation of the collective project and the shift to focusing on the individual self and its aspirations—women's world in a shattered existence*

It is no doubt indicative that Ḥanān al-Shaykh chose for her latest novel *Barīd Bayrūt*<sup>23</sup> (translated into English as *Beirut Blues*) a rather conventional form: that of letter writing. When asked why she chose to use this form, she answered, after a little deliberation, “because I felt the reality I was writing about was fragmented; I wanted a form which in itself embodies this fragmentation.”<sup>24</sup>

But the fragmentation goes much deeper than that; it does not manifest itself only in the dispersed form of letter writing, but in the very formulation of the letters individually: in the disjointed syntactic structures, the inaccurate grammar, the shift from one linguistic level (*fushā* Arabic) to another (colloquial Lebanese) to the sometimes incoherent statements. Furthermore, fragmentation strikes at the very human relationships which had once appeared indestructible: first between Asmahān and Ḥayāt, who had been treated as a unified whole by everybody; then between the two geographic sections of the city, western and eastern (each called, significantly, *al-shiqq*) and then further between the Christians and Muslims, and even further between the Muslims themselves, Sunnites and Shiites, and still further between the Shiites themselves, split into two warring militias, Amal and Hizballah, who both descend from the “pocket” of

<sup>23</sup> Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1992.

<sup>24</sup> In a seminar devoted to her work as a novelist, chaired by this writer, at the School for Oriental and African Studies on March 15, 1995.

al-Imam ‘Alī. The fragmentation is no less acute on the level of the psyche of the individual characters: Umm Faḍīla is mad; Asmahān herself is torn between opposing feelings; her feelings swing from one pole to another on so many different levels. Most significant of these is the shift in her attitude to her friend Ḥayāt in one particular respect, as this underpins the shifts she is subjected to on a much deeper level: that of ideology and world view. Once in the “golden” past, Asmahān writes recounting for her friend Ḥayāt, they were at the AUB in the midst of a demonstration. Ḥayāt asked what Asmahān thought of her eye make up; Asmahān was furious. But now things are narrated in the following fashion, embodying the total shift I have been describing: from involvement in a collective, political, ideological project to the concerns of the individual self.

Here is this poignant and sad passage,

The word demonstration took me back to the sixty-seven war: the faculty is noisy with demonstrations, but an air of gloom hangs over it. You’re asking me if I like your new eye-shadow and you bring your face nearer to me and close your eyes, so that I can see it. At the time I was thunderstruck by the inappropriateness of your question, but now I acknowledge that you were a seer and we didn’t realize it. A prophet of the modern, looking beyond the coming days with X-ray eyes, predicting from a keen sense of reality what would have to be done. You were reckless and I have to admit that you were concerned with the individual rather than the fate of nations—going to the beach was an acceptable substitute for being involved in demonstrations. You gabbled away in different languages and always looked after your appearance even when it came to your choice of toothbrush. We thought of you as frivolous, uncommitted, although you were outstanding at your studies.

Now I find myself saluting you, acknowledging that when you left this country it was a prophetic act, as if you knew in advance that the war would never end in a matter of days, months or years as we believed, that life was too important to spend waiting, for we’d all forgotten why the war had started. Even those who ignited the blaze lost sight of their original aim. They fight, agree to cease-fires, make settlements, fight again, and their war achieves nothing, not even their peace.<sup>25</sup>

Having explored this sense of fragmentation in an explicit, rather direct fashion, al-Shaykh, goes on to embody it symbolically, sharp-

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<sup>25</sup> *Beirut Blues*, translated by Catherine Cobham, Chatto and Windus, London, 1995, 16–17 (p. 21 of the Arabic edition of *Dār al-Hilāl*).

ening its presence and imprinting it in the mind through a concrete picture (reminding one strongly of the technique of the objective correlative advocated by T.S. Eliot) and she does so through a mosaic piece she goes out searching for in the totally jumbled world of al-Dāhiya (the suburb); she finds a mosaic piece depicting three women all scattered into small bits, she offers to retrieve it, to put it together, feeling distraught at the fate of a beautiful work which had survived for thousands of years ending up now as fragments in the Beirut of the war; the tradesman is not keen on her idea because he believes putting the piece together to be an impossible task.

In the midst of this devastation, the crumbling of collective dreams and nationalist projects, al-Shaykh depicts the intense search for personal relationships and individual happiness. She articulates the change that has struck people and their lives and particularly the life of her letter-writing heroine, Asmahān. Then she drives Asmahān powerfully into sexual relationships, love, adventures with men at every point and on every occasion. The narrative focuses on this lust for love, for bodily pleasures, for enchantment and ecstasy, which all come through personal relationships rather than the involvement in, and the search for achievement through, a collective, national project.

## 6.6

From this perspective, it appears possible to situate the entire phenomenon of the rise of feminist discourse within an epistemological structure of loss and hope, of collapse and quest for revival, of agony and search for joy and of a shift in emphasis from the collective, ideological and cerebral to the individualist, concrete and particular. It is perhaps this more than anything else that explains why the feminist-oriented discourse grows increasingly into a more concentrated and physical discourse, focusing not on the ideological level of the female's quest but on concrete reality and, particularly, on the body. The body is turning into the locus of the logos; and I am not merely playing with words here. Two persuasive instances<sup>26</sup> would be 'Abdo Wazīn's *Hadīqat al-Hawāss*<sup>27</sup> (The Garden of the Senses) and Ḥanān al-Shaykh's *Misk al-Ghazāl*<sup>28</sup> (translated into English as *Women of Sand*

<sup>26</sup> For more material on the body, see my *Jamāliyyat al-Tajāwur*, 253–260, 274–281.

<sup>27</sup> Beirut: Dār al-Jadīd, 1989.

<sup>28</sup> Beirut: 2nd ed. Dār al-Ādāb, 1996; first published by the same publisher in 1986.

and *Myrrh*). In the latter, al-Shaykh, whose earlier work presents the quest for liberation of the female within the larger context of the liberation of society as a whole, the female is an autonomous entity; the issues on which the text focuses are localized and devoted to particular feminist questions; the focusing intensifies to a point where lesbianism, for the first time in Arabic fiction, becomes a central theme to the narrative and to the existence of the female characters. More recently, texts focusing on the body have proliferated to a point where a new genre in Arabic writing can be said to be emerging—or an old genre made greatly popular by Abū al-Hindī, Abū Nuwās and Ibn al-Hajjāj in the ‘Abbasid period can be said to be revived and revitalized. One of its most significant and recent manifestations is undoubtedly the appearance of the classical *ghulām*, the beautiful, homosexual boy, in Sa‘dallāh Wannūs’s play which I have just discussed, *Ṭuqūs al-Ishārāt wa l-Taḥawwulāt*. The appearance of the *ghulām* is certainly one of these *ishārāt* and *taḥawwulāt*.

### 6.7

Elsewhere, I observed that this newly found interest in sexuality, homosexuality and the body generally, is deeply linked to the transformations that have taken place in the Arab world on the ideological, political, social and cultural levels.<sup>29</sup> But it seems that what has been happening recently in the Arab context has already happened and reached a climax—no punning intended—in other societies. In the Western world, according to a report published as I was putting the final touches to this paper, sex has come to perform the role traditionally performed by religion. *The Times* of London reports that in a book to be published soon, the Reverend Charles Pickstone argues that,

... the world of sex today is an outlet for natural instincts, a displacement of religious energies. Sex has become a path to an encounter with a primordial mystery. In the past, to escape from suffering, people worshipped God; but today sex is the drug most frequently used to give relief from the stress of living in a rapidly changing society.

Pickstone goes on to say that sex, like religion, can transport the individual to a world of ecstasy and heightened experience. “Sex is the new spirituality.”

<sup>29</sup> *Jamāliyyat al-Tajāwur*, 277–282.

According to the report, Pickstone says that many people are writing, talking and fantasizing about sex because, "Sex has become the religion of the Western world, the bearer of most people's hopes of encountering something truly 'other'."<sup>30</sup>

Many of the points made here strike one as being totally true of the passages, scenes and attitudes displayed especially in Ḥanān al-Shaykh's *Barīd Bayrūt*. In fact, so many passages are written as though they were invented in order to illustrate the points made by Pickstone. But one can go much further than Pickstone and argue as I have done indeed throughout this paper, that sex is a *substitute ideology*, an obsession generated by the collapse of totalizing discourse connected with revolutionary thought and political activism and the rise of fragmentary discourses. My argument can best be supported by this tantalizing report of the intellectual climate in New York in the 1990s as seen by *The Times* of London correspondent there. His report is too long to quote but its opening passages are of particular relevance to my argument as they appear to state the case I had stated much earlier in my book *Jamāliyyat al-Tajāwur* with reference to the Arab cultural context:

Back in the Sixties and early Seventies, when Greenwich Village wobbled to the chants of yogis, when sons and daughters of respectable America clenched fist in solidarity with Malcolm X and much of Manhattan's Upper West Side smelt of patchouli, folk talked of "radical chic." In those far-off days it was cool to be left wing, to flash the peace sign and to plot the people's revenge.

In the course of a quarter century, the act of rebellion has slipped down in the body, from the heart (it was seldom the brain) to the groin.

Revolution these days literally takes balls.

The new rebellion is to discuss sex, preferably deviant sex, as openly and graphically as one can. The clever new thing in art and culture is, as *Vogue* memorably put it, perversion chic."<sup>31</sup>

## 7.

If the rise of feminist discourse and the intensification of interest in feminist issues as particular, localized issues can be seen as a substitute, within the epistemological structures inhabiting the space of

<sup>30</sup> March 8, 1997, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Quentin Letts, "How Perversion Became Chic," *The Times* (March 27, 1997): 21.

the modernist imagination, for the collapse of totalizing discourses and totalistic ideologies, an interesting question presents itself: does the fragmentation and consequent rise of fragmentary discourses apply to the creative output of women as it applies to writings by men, or does “women’s world” retain its organicity and cohesion within a fragmented social space? What I have said about Ḥanān al-Shaykh and the fragmentary structure of her *Beirut Blues* is undoubtedly significant in this connection. As significantly, Ahdaf Suweif, one of the finest novelists to have dealt with the years of the rising tide of nationalism and the collective project and to have explored the active role of women within that project, also chose a fragmented form, that of diaries, for her *In the Eye of the Sun*.<sup>32</sup> Yet, it might be possible still to argue that women’s world as embodied in fiction possesses a higher degree of organicity and cohesion and displays less intense signs of fragmentation/multiplicity than the world of men: there is still an organic theme, a unifying principle, a dominant emotion, and a prevailing intellectual position in most texts produced by women. It is not accidental that both Ahdaf Suweif and Aḥlām Mistghānīmī<sup>33</sup> produce texts which explore the years of nationalist struggle—in the Arab world at large and Egypt in particular in the case of the first, and in Algeria in the case of the second—some thirty years after the event, and at a time when fiction by male writers in most parts of the Arab world, has transcended these issues and come to explore different spaces and more personal worlds, including feminist issues of the localized type I referred to above.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> London: Bloomsbury, 1992.

<sup>33</sup> See her *Dhākirat al-Ḥasad* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Almost wherever one looks nowadays, one sees expressions of this rejection of totalizing ideologies and search for an autonomous, indeed fully independent space for women outside them. On Sunday, 21 April, 1997, a morning religious broadcast on BBC 1 showed a group of women discussing women and religion; one of them surrounds herself completely with female pictures from ancient goddesses to Mary to more recent figures, her argument is that the Church has always been dominated by men and she wants to escape from it. Another woman expressed the sense of anxiety facing women because the Church is too patriarchal and women are faced with the question whether to remain within the Church and bring their feminist vision to it from within, in an attempt to change it, or to break away completely and work in a space totally outside the Church where women can perform as women independently from the overall, total patriarchal domain. Such sentiments are also acts of exclusion identical with the act of exclusion I described in the work of Salīm Barakāt: the difference is that in the latter, exclusion functions on the level ethnic minority versus ethnic majority and here on the level female

8.

Lest we think that the problematic I have been exploring is specific to the Arab world and Arabic culture, let me refer quickly to the vital debate that splits American societies and cultures to warring groups. The melting away of the melting pot in the United States (are they really that united?) and the proliferation—note my initially very neutral term—of discourses alongside ethnic, cultural, political, sectarian, sexual ideologies, have been viewed by some as multiplicity and by others as fragmentation. I only need to refer here to proponents of the second view, as the advocates of multiculturalism are well known and their work is very familiar: Arthur Schlessinger has devoted an entire book to formulating the second viewpoint: that of fragmentation, giving a 1992 book of his, quite significantly, the title, *The Dis-uniting of America*. Reviewing this book, a distant and usually very sober critic, Frank Kermode, undoubtedly sensing the immediate relevance of Schlessinger's arguments to the rising conflicts and splits within his own British society, said, commenting on the situation in general terms: "The self-gathering of black history or women's history presages a more general social fragmentation and endangers the precious ideal of political unity in ethnic diversity."<sup>35</sup>

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versus male. Semiotically, the signs in these series are identical: weak versus strong; dominated versus dominating; emerging and new versus historically established.

<sup>35</sup> "Whose History is bunk," *The New York Times Book Review* (3 February, 1992): 3. Could it be argued, in fact, that the rise and proliferation of a term like African-American literature or culture itself embodies a process of fragmentation? The term American literature is no longer easy to apply in the face of the powerful drive to treat writings by black writers in America as a separate body of material; the recent publication of a Norton Anthology of African-American literature can be seen as an indication of such a difficulty. Significantly, a reviewer of this anthology in Britain went so far as to claim that, "Black Americans didn't simply make significant contributions to American literature, they are the inseparable, life giving, blood pumping heart of the thing, . . . in much the same way that Black music is the essence of American music—jazz, rock, hip-hop all have their origins in Black America—so too, the African-American soul is the empowering spirit of American letters." Christopher John Farley, *The Times*, (27 March, 1997): 40. It is significant here, as in many other places, that Black and American are both capitalised. Yet a more significant point in this comment is the fact that the writer appears to be reclaiming a sense of unity and transcending fragmentation through a reversal of the notions of "major", and "minor." Black literature and music are no longer phenomena within American literature and music, they are the very essence and soul of those literature and music that are American!

## IV

*Post Script*

The collapse of totalizing discourse and notions of unity with the resultant phenomena of fragmentation/multiplicity is underlined by a much more fundamental process: the end of an aesthetic of unity and similarity and the rise of an aesthetic of contiguity and difference. Discourses no longer fight to subsume one another and dissolve each other into a unified whole; the search for and fabrication of similarity is no longer the passionate goal it had been in earlier decades. We are no longer all Semites, Arabs, or Muslim;<sup>36</sup> we are now ourselves: each his own identity, each a unit of being, discourse and quest. And the variety of units exist in a contiguous fashion, one next to the other. Various styles, fashions, schools of thought exist in this mode; various religious groups argue for such an existence. Very recently, the Imam of the Shiites in Lebanon, Muḥammad Mahdī Shams al-Dīn, a very wise man and an impressive intellectual, argued, rather startlingly, that it is not desirable to unify all Muslim sects in one sect or to call for “an Islam without *madhāhib*,” calling instead for “the unity of the *umma* in the branching out of *madhāhib* and the variety of *madhāhib* in the unity of the *umma*”<sup>37</sup> while at the same time urging the Shiite communities to achieve what he calls “*indimā*” into their national communities. Is this ambiguous? Is he replacing religious unity with national unity? Yet, at the same time he argues that the time has not come for sectarianism to be done away with. In these notions there lies much of what I have been laboring to depict: unity as a principle of existence is no longer a valid and viable ideology or an organizing principle. The aesthetics of fusion have gone, and in their place an aesthetic of being together, of contiguous existence, has emerged.

Literary texts display this underlying principle of organization in a clear-cut fashion. A poem no longer aspires to dissolve all its con-

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<sup>36</sup> This is true despite the fact that a new, unifying identity has been proclaimed recently in some limited quarters, motivated purely by the drive to reach a political settlement with Israel: some Arabs have recently declared that we are all children of Abraham; King Hussain of Jordan, who usually makes great store of his Hashemite genealogy when it appears useful, has been the spokesman of this new identity, when it appears useful.

<sup>37</sup> *al-Majalla*, London, no. 889 (23 February, 1997): 11.

stituent parts into an overall organic unity of the type dreamt up by Coleridge and the Romantics and sought hard by Adonis and others at an earlier point in the emergence of modernist poetics. The short story has fragmented into a series of passages or images or flashbacks or snap shots; the narrative text in the novel has lost the solidly diachronic time around which it had been organized for so long. In its place, synchronic time has come to dominate, embodying a different perspective on reality. Reification has acquired a powerful presence and the traditional hero has given room to language or objects as dominant figures. The narrative itself has become punctuated with holes and fundamental questions of the type, "Do I know the world I am trying to narrate?" have replaced the technically motivated question of, "How do I narrate something that I know well, have complete control over, and want to narrate?" As one scholar has observed with reference to the fiction of Elias Khoury and other Lebanese writers:

When the reality one knows and loves is shattered, for instance by the loss of a child, as happens to Nadia Tueni (Nādiyā Tuwaynī), or by the eruption of violent warfare in a beloved country at close quarters, as witnessed by Elias Khoury and Hudā Barakāt, it tends to be reflected in the preoccupation with inner and outer schisms, self and other, us and them . . . The splintering process is mirrored in a fragmented style of writing, multi-layered with synchronistic flashbacks, symbolic references and imagined interludes. For instance, in Khoury's *The Kingdom of Strangers*, the snatches of personal stories are like slides being superimposed on an original picture in fixed geographical space—that of the author by the Dead Sea with Mary—with constantly moving angles and shots: author and Mary in the Jordan Valley, author and Mary in Beirut, by the sea, in the flat . . . then Widād's story surfaces . . . now Samīra's story intervenes.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, Yumnā al-ʿĪd has observed that the literature of the civil war in Lebanon is characterized mainly by fragmentation on the structural level.<sup>39</sup> In a certain sense, this is an embodiment of the "deep structure" of the politics of writing. The political conflicts embody themselves in conflicting linguistic structures; the politics of displacement, the dislocations caused by war, the tensions, ambiguities,

<sup>38</sup> Patricia Kazan, "The Problematics of Otherness in Modern Lebanese Literature," Ph.D. thesis in progress, Ch. 1, 1.

<sup>39</sup> See her essay, "Al-Ẓill wa l-Ṣadā: Mashhad al-Kharāb" (The Shadow and the Echo: The Scene of Destruction) *Mawāqif*, no. 72 (summer, 1993): 56–71.

contradictions, all manifest themselves in a poetics of displacement, dislocation, ambiguity, and ultimately, fragmentation. Such a poetics differs fundamentally from the poetics of affinities, similarities, mystical connections and unity which had flourished in the fifties and sixties and which had been generated by an overwhelming drive towards the transcendence of differences and conflicts and the achievement of unity in the political sphere. It will be rather fascinating to see how these processes develop and what the shape of things to come will be as we scuttle towards a new millennium.

COMMITTED POSTMODERNITY:  
MUḤAMMAD BARRĀDA'S *THE GAME OF FORGETTING*

MAGDA M. AL-NOWAIHI

Modern and postmodern theories have contested the concept of the self as autonomous, whole, and fixed, and instead posit the view that it is a construct of ideology; of social and political systems; of culture in the widest sense of the term, and that it is fragmented and in a constant state of flux. If we as individuals are constructed, in a sense predetermined by our history, both personal and public, then what are the possibilities for freedom, rationality, and transformation, both for our own lives as well as our communities and countries? In addition, the constructedness of the self has been linked to the idea that the language by which it expresses its essence is also culturally determined and time-specific. What are the implications for language as a basic tool of expression, comprehension, and communication? For the writer of literature, there are some further questions. To what extent can literature, whose primary medium is language, express or reflect a reality which is elusive, shifting, and relative, and what influence does the narrative have, if any, on the culture within which it is produced, and which it is addressing? If the text itself is a cultural captive, what power does it have to transform consciousness and achieve change? This is a particularly critical issue to writers in the Arab world, for whom the political function of literature is of paramount importance, and who would find it difficult to accept the notion that their writings have no impact.

The Moroccan writer Muḥammad Barrāda addresses these tensions of self and society in his postmodern narrative *Lu'bat al-Nīsyān*, which has been translated into English by Issa Boullata under the title *The Game of Forgetting*.<sup>1</sup> The central conflict is between what is

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<sup>1</sup> Muḥammad Barrāda (Mohamed Berrada), *Lu'bat al-Nīsyān* (Rabat: Dār al-Amān, 1987). Mohamed Berrada, *The Game of Forgetting*, translated by Issa J. Boullata (Austin: University of Texas at Austin Press, 1996). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations

seen as a basic need for unity and continuity, which is often at odds with the urgent imperative for change, both on the personal and the communal levels. As these conflicting needs pull the characters in one direction or the other, they alternatively play the games of remembering and forgetting. The tension between the need to retain history on the one hand, and to liberate oneself from the past on the other, is played out on almost every level in the narrative, and is focused in three general textual locations: gender relations, politics, and the problematic process of producing the text itself. The conflict is also reflected in the formless, sometimes seemingly incoherent structure of *The Game of Forgetting*. The text is divided into sections that are composed of smaller sections, most of which do not fit in the customary framework of “chapter”. Many of these sections are narrated monologues which form a dialogue with one another, though some of them are a dizzying pastiche of multiple voices and languages. The narrators of the monologues are sometimes made explicit in the titles of the sections, but in other cases it is not at first glance possible to determine who they are, and it is only after putting together various bits and pieces of information that one can do so. This is particularly true of recurrent sections entitled “Illumination” (*iḍāʿa*) and “Obscuration” (*taʿtīm*). Moreover, the frequent intrusion of “the narrators’ narrator” (*rāwī al-ruwāh*, or the supreme narrator) and the “writer” or “author” in the text does not allow the reader to forget for very long that the persons behind the voices of *The Game of Forgetting* are fictitious; no longer replicas of the “real” people from whom they originated, and that they are being manipulated within the text for aesthetic and ideological purposes that are not of their own making. In other words, in this metanarrative the composition of the text is a central issue in the text. There is no linear movement or progression and very little action in this work, no adventure or plot that can be easily summarized. But although the dramas take place in primarily interior spaces, we do not lose sight of society and its problems. *The Game of Forgetting*, in spite of its title, never descends into a verbal game divorced from real issues and concerns. It questions basic notions of “truth” and “reality”, acknowledges its own limitations, and is characterized by tension, conflict, and contradictions which are explored and debated but which seem

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and page citations are from Boullata’s translation. For a biography of Barrāda, see Boullata’s introduction, 2–5.

ultimately irreconcilable, yet it remains deeply committed in its questions and quests, and the struggles within it do not close it off, but instead involve it in a struggle with, and for, its world.<sup>2</sup>

#### THE BODY'S MEMORY, OR: GENDERED ENTRAPMENTS

Hādī, the main character and the most prominent voice in the text, is undergoing a mid-life crisis, brought about by the deteriorating state of affairs in Morocco in the public sphere, and the death of his mother in the private one. He embarks on a journey of self-understanding, focusing on his relationships with women, with his family, as well as on his role as social reformer. Starting with his mother, who on many levels is the beginning and the end in *The Game of Forgetting*, Hādī analyzes in primarily Freudian terms his relationship with his own body and with the women he has desired and loved, wondering whether he wished that his mother was with him on his first encounter with sexual pleasure. (96) The first intimacies and pleasures with the mother are echoed in his subsequent relationships with women: "I remember childhood and immediately remember youth. I recall adolescence and instantly recall sucking mother's nipple and that of the sweetheart." (22)

Yet increasingly Hādī is disturbed by the realization that his various love affairs are not as free or experimental as he would like to believe. Initially, he believes that one of the major differences between himself and his brother Taye' is the fact that Taye' has buried the past in an attempt to approach life rationally and freely, with the

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<sup>2</sup> Edwār al-Kharrāt, in discussing this novel asserts that one of the main characteristics of modernity in Arabic literature is the fact that the text, rather than offering resolutions, poses questions. "Zawāhir fī l-Riwāya al-Maghribiyya," (Some Aspects of the Maghribi Novel) *an-Nāqid* 30 (December 1990): 18–23. And of course various schools of literary theory contend that contradiction is a condition of narrative. Barrāda is a noted critic and professor of literature and literary theory. He obtained his doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1973, where he wrote a dissertation on "Muḥammad Mandūr wa Tanzīr al-Naqd al-'Arabī (Muḥammad Mandūr and the Theorization of Arabic Criticism) (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1979). He also has translated theoretical works by Bakhtin and Barthes, among others. (For a complete bibliography of his works, see Boullata's introduction) He is deeply concerned with the interplay between western literary theory and Arabic literary criticism. See, for example, "Riwāya 'Arabiyya Jadīda," (A New Arabic Novel) in *Al-Riwāya l-'Arabiyya: Wāqī' wa Āfāq (The Arabic Novel: Its Reality and Horizons)*, ed. Muḥammad Barrāda et al. (Beirut: Dār Ibn Rushd, 1981), 5–13.

result that he has deprived himself from wholeness and spontaneity, and finds it very difficult to speak about his body. (79) Indeed, by Taya's own admission, his wife's appeal had been one of the mind rather than the instincts. Their union was a result of the common principles and political ideals they shared, and he always escaped from women who were closer to his temperament and instinctive taste. (78) Hādī, on the other hand, believed that he had kept his childhood and its primary physical pleasures and sensual satisfactions alive within him, and that this enabled him to maintain an easy harmony with his body and its desires. Later, however, Hādī begins to realize that his relationships with women in fact are limiting because these relationships are limited by the past. An encounter with a white-skinned woman cannot be consummated because she has no instinctive appeal to him, and suddenly a memory that had so far been suppressed emerges unbeckoned. He remembers seeing the naked white body of his aunt, laid on a bed, and rushing into the room to embrace her, when the other women pull him away roughly, for it is a corpse, his beloved aunt having died that afternoon. At the moment when the suppressed memory emerges, he realizes how his relationships with women are outside his control, almost genetically predetermined by pre-historical events. Not only does he lack freedom of choice, but also such relationships are essentially superficial. A deep relationship can only begin when he escapes his pre-history, and with it the game of colors and the black/white duality; when he dissociates dark skin from warmth and life, and white skin from coldness and death. (50–53) This "obscuration" concludes a section entitled "Our Prehistory", referring to very early events of childhood over which the individual has absolutely no control, and may not even remember consciously, but which have been retained in the psyche and continue to predetermine much of one's inclinations and desires. This is, of course, Freud's unconscious.

Gender relations are a central location in the narrative for the tension between the hold of the past, providing the safety and comfort of traditional forms of relationships, and the desire for freedom and new modes of interaction. When Hādī, the educated man who reads Freud, Hegel, and contemporary feminist texts goes to visit his old neighborhood, the women whom he finds immensely attractive are those dressed in traditional clothes. It is not that their clothes are veiling hidden beauties and pleasures of the flesh, but rather the hidden pleasures of the past. Just as the odors and tastes of the old

neighborhood sharpen his senses and awaken a nostalgia for remembered pleasures—pleasures experienced with an intensity that seems impossible to duplicate in the later years—the bodies of veiled women bring back memories of the first object of sensual adulation. They recall the woman whose touches awakened in his body the first pleasures and desires (after the mother?), and whose memory still has the power to transport him to the fantastical erotic world of *One Thousand and One Nights*. (111–113) This duality in responding to women is not limited to the two brothers. For example, the wife of a famous businessman skis, plays tennis, and dresses in the latest fashions from Paris. She also has become accustomed to her husband's favorite sexual game: at night she dances to Andalusian music, dressed in layers of traditional clothes which her husband must slowly peel off before falling asleep on her breasts. (119–120) Is this a compromise, an “imagined balance between an inherited past and a glittery present,” (120) or is it rather a form of schizophrenia, a cultural disease? The implication seems to be that it is a false compromise; only an illusion of one, with the individuals performing the “secret ritual of collusion” becoming compromised in ambivalence and deceit.

But why is it harmful to yield to the power of the past if it means being true to the desires of the body and in harmony with one's instincts? How can Taye's rational, but basically superficial and unsatisfying relationships with women be any healthier than Hādī's fairly fulfilling ones? Although *The Game of Forgetting* does not offer an easy resolution to this issue, there is a strong suggestion that the burden of history is a heavy one for women to bear. Perhaps the most disturbed and unhappy character in this world is a young woman with whom Hādī has a short but intense affair, and whom we know only by her initials: F.B. By denying her a name, she comes to represent “woman”, or at least one type of woman. F.B. feels that she lives in a prison, conditioned and determined by men's views, whom she sees as a tribal power, censoring her dreams and desires, and depriving her from exploring freedom, even if it is only illusory. She is extremely bitter about the fact that any privileges she enjoys have to be “granted” by a man, and sees herself as part a “structure” (“*bunya*”, or “construct”) or a vision from which there is no escape. (105–106) To assert her sense of self and fulfill her need to recreate language and dreams, she embraces two types of behavior that ultimately destroy her. She plucks herself away from her roots and isolates herself from a society which she has given up any hope

or desire to transform, and she experiments to “experience extreme states of the mind, the body, and relationships.” (99–100) In the final analysis, however, she is lonely and broken; her dreams and struggles for finding her true self end in “death of the victories of the dreamy, winged woman she used to be.” (100)

Not only women who actively rebel against their constructedness, against the views of others determining them and limiting their possibilities, suffer. Although women who learn to play the game according to the rules set by previous generations may not see themselves as prisoners, they are seen as such by the narrator and Hādī. This imprisonment is a game, “agreed upon in the social space of the old city of Fez, in the implicit balance prevailing there between men and women, whereby she is allowed to be present and indispensable, like salt in food, but has to remain behind a veil, because the inherited tribal values require that.” (17) If we take, for example, the third sibling, Taye‘ and Hādī’s sister Najjiyya, who is basically accepting of the roles that have been ascribed to her by others, we see that she bears a heavy burden. Her childhood is brought to an end very early: she neither goes to the Qur’anic nor to the modern school like her brothers, and “learnt nothing but cooking, embroidery, decency, and good manners.” (19) While the two brothers enjoy their childhood games, she is enmeshed in household chores and responsibilities, gets married at the age of fourteen, and proceeds to have eleven children who overwhelm her with their needs and demands. Perhaps even more painful is the inability of those around her to view her as an individual; to think of her as a unique self worth discovering and understanding, rather than a continuation of her mother. After their mother’s death, Hādī suddenly realizes that he does not know who his sister really is, that even as a child they did not ask her to play or include her in their adventures, and that the relationship they have is a stagnant one. He had her “placed within a frame and treated according to family dictates and qualifications,” and not seen her as “a human being ‘endowed with speech,’ who had her opinions, her observations and evaluations of people and the world.” (76) He realizes that she has remained “in an area of shade for thirty years, far from my interests and complicities. She was my sister and that was enough. Quiet, reasonable, following in mother’s footsteps. Was that not what erased her from my circle of light . . .?” (73) However, Hādī only vaguely realizes that he is driven to this rediscovery of his sister by his own needs, for the death of

his mother requires finding a new bond with childhood, which he hopes Najiyya will be able to supply. He is not really uncovering her, but creating for her a new role that fits his emerging needs. It appears that the self is fated to be known only through the limits that others bring to it.

### CAPTIVE SELVES

The degree to which the self is a construction, predetermined by others who are in their turn predetermined by history, is not restricted to women and men's relationships with them. Even before the text-proper, we are confronted with the notion of a powerless, captive self, for the dedication describes the subject as "a time that possesses us more than we possess it." Thus Taye<sup>6</sup> thinks that his inability to speak of his inner feelings may be due to the fact that he has "accepted the image that others have formed" of him. (76) And, according to the 'narrators' narrator', "in the final analysis, we do not really understand those with whom we live, and especially those we love." (36) An integral part of any person will always remain absent, and cannot be recalled by us. Even the narrator only knows the other through his or her behavior, words, and "through the image others have formed of him and, perhaps, the one he formed of himself through people." (36) It seems there is a double jeopardy involved when one constructs one's self-image according to the view that others have formed of him/her, when they can never really know his/her essence. The problem is not simply that others' needs and desires from us may be incompatible with our own. Rather, it is that we ourselves assume, in basic and unconscious ways, these very roles, and it is not only they but also we who want to play them—they become our own.<sup>3</sup>

Barrāda's ideas in this respect seem to be influenced by Freud, whose formulation of the unconscious unsettles the unity of the self. In particular, Jacques Lacan's readings of Freud have resulted in seeing the self "as fundamentally split between the 'I' that one holds

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the clear Freudian and Lacanian overtones of Barrada's analysis of this issue, there are also similarities to the Foucauldian concept of technologies of the self. See Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. L. Martin, H. Gutman, and P. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

to be an ideal and the 'I' that one sees reflected back from others . . . Lacan locates the individual's awareness of this split at 'the mirror stage,' the moment when the child first recognizes its own reflection, and realizes that 'I' is—from another perspective—also an 'other.' Not coincidentally, this developmental moment occurs during the stage in which the child also acquires language."<sup>4</sup> To be able to enter into society, the child adopts "a matrix of subject-positions, which may be inconsistent or even in contradiction with one another." "The subject is thus the site of contradiction, and is consequently perpetually in the process of construction, thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change."<sup>5</sup> The self is not one, and it is impossible, for example, for the "narrators' narrator" to explicate Sī Ṭayyib, the uncle, by locating one common thread that connects the divergent, sometimes contradictory, scenes and stages which comprise his life. (36–37) Nor is it only Sī Ṭayyib who is constantly changing his skin. Hādī the adolescent, when he moves from his native Fez to Rabat, has to locate a new self to face his new, strange world. (45) And Ibrāhīm, Najīyya's husband, continuously reinvents his self according to his location in society. At home, he is traditional and authoritarian. In his job at "Henri's Bar", he is the urbane, sophisticated, French-speaking bar-man thinking nothing of serving alcoholic beverages. And when the boys are his audience, he creates for himself an imaginary persona that will enable him to gain their love and admiration. (66–70) And yet according to Hādī, Ibrāhīm, in the trajectories and the changing tempos of his life, has continued to be bound to one aim that he never swerves from, which is caring for his family. In spite of that, Hādī cannot fully comprehend "the secret of the unity of his life journey, for he continuously lived in diverse and contradictory situations." (69)

This tension between the self's essential and unavoidable multiplicity, and its basic need for unity, and continuity, is at the core of the conflict between the games of forgetting and remembering. Hādī has a strong desire to be a unified being, and to avoid "an overwhelming feeling of disintegration that transformed him into

<sup>4</sup> Robyn Warhol, "Autobiography," in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 1034.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Belsey, "Constructing The Subject, Deconstructing The Text," in *Feminisms*, 596–97. For a good outline of Lacanian thought, see Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

atoms.” (40) In this quest, the crucial question for him is whether the unity of the self is best achieved by attempting to erase, or hold on to the past. He is constantly vacillating between these two positions. At certain moments, he tries to convince himself that continuity, or memory, is dangerous, for it deadens our enthusiasm for change, for recreating the self and the world, and keeps us in rusty monotony. In some sense, that which is constant is also lost. (74) From that point of view, it would be valid to forget in order to experience things anew. But often that seems impossible, for he had concluded “that childhood was present in us like blood in our veins and that all people, most probably, would—like him, as he thought—close their eyes at death on moments or scenes from childhood imprinted in their cells.” (40) It seems that every particle of his being has its root in his childhood. Even his strong patriotic sense may be a result of his memory retaining, in the unconscious, a host of nationalist words and poems that inflamed his passion as a school-boy, and are still echoed in his soul. (43)

Yet these historically determined elements of his personality create a split between his rational and his emotional side, a duality between the mind and the instincts, as we have seen in his attitude towards women. They represent a triumph of the unconscious, and with it the body, over the conscious. Would it not be better, to heal that split and resolve the dichotomy between the rational and the irrational, for the self to practice the game of forgetting? The answer Hādī ultimately comes up with is in the negative. Unity and coherence, although desirable, may also be a heavy burden. The contradictions, even incompatibilities within the self, serve as a fuel for rebellion and self-determination, “and support us in our adventures for the sake of survival, understanding, change, and toleration of life’s troubles.” (51) Thus continuity is redefined as the simultaneous presence, in the body and the memory, of the unconscious and the conscious, of our pre-history as well as our history, and it allows the self to be a process that is in a constant state of transformation and discovery. (52) In other words, this tension within the self; this inner dialogue of multiple forces is the very source of the appetite to break out of the monotonous and the familiar, and to constantly recreate the self and the world.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the “intolerable pressures of finding one non-contradictory position for the subject,” see Belsey, 597.

On another level, the “narrators’ narrator” argues that primary, absolute unity is truly attainable only in our “pre-history”, in the city of childhood, “the womb-city, the unitary-unifying city.” (60)<sup>7</sup> It is as we grow older, or as “the world grows in our eyes”, and we create the multiple selves to meet the needs and demands of that growing, diverse world, that we lose our primary unity. Since the true, pure, and original unity can only be found in the distant past, and in temporary states when we recapture “the self satisfied with its first, full era,” (translation mine *Lu‘bat al-Nisyān*, 28) then the game of forgetting is invalidated as a search for unity. The mother becomes an essential figure in the self’s quest for unity, for she is the other within which it is possible. She is the beginning, the end, and the ever-present. (22–23) Her centrality is echoed in the arrangement of the text, which begins and ends with her death. The first section is entitled “In the Beginning Was The Mother,” and the final one “Who of You Remembers My Mother?” The pain which her death produces is presented as a critical motivation behind the self-examination that Hādī, and to some extent also Taye<sup>c</sup>, is undertaking. In some sense, Hādī’s relationships with women, with various bodies at various moments, are an attempt to recapture and duplicate that primary unity with the mother, through melting into the body of the other. The final pages of *The Game of Forgetting* can almost be read as a hymn to the mother. Hādī sees her as filling the fragile void of the soul, allowing us to see meaning and relatedness. “She is like poetry. She is a desire to embrace the absolute.” (135) She is the firm root which binds him to the world, and though her ever-present memory brings forth almost intolerable feelings of loss and desolation which apparently prompt him to start the game of forgetting, he is learning to accept the pain, for her memory also provides him with the strength to face life, and not to join “the living dead.” (134–143)

#### ROOTED IN THE WORLD: THE POSTCOLONIAL DIVIDE

While connectedness with the mother is an important dimension in the self’s search for unity, coherence, and continuity, a further step

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<sup>7</sup> According to Freudian-Lacanian theory, this would be the child before the “mirror-image” stage.

seems to be required. Salvation is linked in *The Game of Forgetting* to the collective; to an entity which transcends the temporality and mutations of the individual, and enables him/her to be rooted in the time and space within which s/he exists, so that one envelops as well as is enveloped by the world around him/her. Connectedness with a community distinguishes those who are happy and with a sense of purpose and meaning. Their lives are not free of problems or turmoil, and yet they are not prone to the self-doubt, loneliness, and despair of those who have given up on society. The mother, for example, in spite of widowhood and poverty, is essentially happy and comfortable with who she is and what she stands for. She is referred to as the "root" of the house, which is rooted in the old city: "The shining presence of her personality makes her seem like the roots of a tree extending far beyond this old house, which is firmly implanted in one of the alleys deep in the heart of Fez." (20) Even the house in this case represents a communal mode of existence, for it is not the modern house of the nuclear family, but the home of the extended family, as well as an assortment of other families living within it. These various individuals are joined in a collective being, and held firmly together by the mother's strength, generosity, and genuine concern for every member in the unit. The women of the household think of her as "the mother" (17) and are dismayed at her impending departure for fear that it will rupture their unity.

Similarly, her brother Sī Ṭayyib's "warm colors are an extension of those of trees and flowers on the fertile banks of Wad Fez." (26) He is at "the center of this beehive" composed of those with whom he works. (26) In spite of the difficult times brought about by the war and the death of his beloved wife, he continues to be "like a tree striking deep roots in the earth of the ancient city . . . Nor did he let the winds sever the branches that connected him with the world around him and the world within him." (28) The women speak of him as "the salt necessary for our daily life," (32) a firm piece in the structure of the house, a "*qibla*" centering all its residents, his heart taking them all in. A major difference between Hādī and Taye' on the one hand, and their sister Najīyya and her husband Ibrāhīm on the other, may very well be one of connectedness to the outside world. Whereas the latter were able to absorb the time and space surrounding them like sponges, and to remain within the entrails of that world, the two brothers have somehow failed to do so. They

have not been able to contain their times and growing worlds within their own words and concepts. (89)

This difference in the ability to connect with the larger world is generational, and Morocco's independence from France is the distinguishing historical moment that marks this generational rift. The older generation to which the mother and uncle belong (Najiyya and Ibrāhīm are to a great extent seen as a relic of the past; a continuation of the roles played by the mother and the uncle) saw the enemy as the other: France, and believed that the struggle against this outsider, however painful and costly on a personal level, held the hope for change and improvement for the nation. The post-colonial generation, however, can no longer see the enemy as the intruding other, whose disappearance would almost automatically lead to positive transformation. The world in which they live has, in the words of the title of one of the sections, grown in their eyes. It has become more complex and confusing, and the enemy now lies within. Moroccans themselves must now be held at least partly responsible for the lack of real change, and the two brothers are most bitter about the internal powers of corruption, deceit, tyranny, and lack of vision.

While they are still committed to transforming the nation, they are growing increasingly skeptical about doing so. Here again their approaches are different, and once more they reflect their ambivalent feelings towards history. Initially, Taya<sup>c</sup> believed in the precedence of the public over the private, and directed his energies to erasing the old in order to recreate the nation, which is the counterpart of his personal attempts to disconnect from his past in order to become a rational, unified human being. Having failed to build anything worthwhile, he now hearkens to a different version of history, which is that of Islam. In his case, however, this return to the past is almost apolitical; a form of personal rather than collective salvation. Hādī, on the other hand, views individual change as a prerequisite for rebuilding the nation. His return to the past is of a more personal nature, and is rooted in his own needs. He believes that the past to which they should return is that of personal history, or to the mother. In a public meeting, he suggests that instead of discussing the same old abstract schemes and general plans, they should focus on the mother and their early relationships with her. It is only through understanding these primary, elemental, "prehistoric" influences on them that the collective, which is primarily a

grouping of individuals, can understand “all that embodies the values that unite” them, and truly change. (137)<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps even more disturbing is the growing conviction that change is simply not possible. Both Hādī and Taye‘ are coming close to believing that the individual cannot actually “make history”, this being more an illusion than a reality. Hādī sees around him old skeletons which he had hoped by now would be obsolete, and what he had believed to be temporary ghosts have become permanent. He views his efforts, and that of others, as returning to point zero, for nothing has changed, nor seems to be changing as they had hoped. (75) Taye‘ compares himself to Sisyphus, or worse, since he has been denied even the illusion of ascent, for he has been pushing his rock on a flat land, without any hills or elevations. (81)<sup>9</sup> Yet they are both determined not to descend into total nihilism. Although Hādī is now more or less convinced that history is nothing but a series of cycles that endlessly repeats itself, (82) he continues to affirm the necessity of values and struggle for human existence. Believing, dreaming, and fighting for those beliefs and dreams are what give life meaning amidst the engulfing absurdity, brutality, and destruction. (124) The brothers are disheartened to observe the younger generation’s general apathy and almost total lack of belief in anything other than self-preservation. Instead of attempting to build the nation, they are consumed with building villas, with grasping on to rocks and hiding behind cement, for that at least convinces them that they can build something tangible, within which they can feel important and secure. (139) It is painful to witness this generation’s despair masked by self-interest, for whether the notion that the individual can actually make history is a reality or an illusion, “this matters little to those not touched by the fire of that reality-illusion. But there is nothing more painful than depriving a generation of the brimming enthusiasm and defiance created by the illusions of a period and its realities.” (46)

<sup>8</sup> Barrāda is careful not to fall into the trap of positioning mothers as “repositories of national identity, as well as markers of national progress or backwardness.” See Omnia Shakry, “Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt,” in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998): 135.

<sup>9</sup> For an exposition of the different conceptions of time in writing colonial history, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for Indian Pasts?” *Representations* 37, no. 4. 1–26.

## IN SEARCH OF A NEW LANGUAGE

Language becomes a central symptom, and symbol, of the emptiness that engulfs the younger generation and prevents it from connecting with the collective being. The description of a wedding of one of the nephews is very telling in this respect. The supposedly happy occasion brings together various members of society, and is full of noise and conversation, but very little actual communication. The wide array of dialects and languages of different regions, classes, and ethnicities becomes an outward sign of the inability to find a common language to address critical issues and real concerns.<sup>10</sup> The older generation, particularly those who have reached positions of authority and are part of the establishment, use language to distort and conceal, to defend their status quo and what is truly reprehensible. The younger generation, while pretending to listen with attention and respect, have obviously given up on gleaning any truth from such conversations. The few of them who are apt to question or contradict are requested to “be silent in order not to disturb the ministers working hard, day and night.” (120) Indeed, it seems that most often the silence, or what is left unsaid, is more significant than what is actually spoken. The impossibility of dialogue makes the young people feel that they are a present without a past, and their elders a past without a present. (123) Many of them have also learned to use language to hide and dissemble. Even when they desire sincerity, they are incapable of avoiding the cinematic dialogue of an Egyptian movie. (120) Some have even despaired of language itself, while the few who remain optimistic see that the only hope is to create a new language—one that could be shared by all those who still desire, and are willing to work for change.

While the desire to recreate the self and the nation is often expressed in terms of a desire to find a new language, and with it new dreams and alternatives, the powers of authority certainly use language in ingenuous ways that transform reality. This transformation, however, is one that will remain within a closed text. Its ultimate purpose is not to address a reality that is outside of language in order to change

<sup>10</sup> Edwār al-Kharrāt comments on the heteroglossia as well as the fragmented nature of language in this novel in “*Zawāhir*,” 21. Barrāda discusses the importance of using multiple languages in Maghribi literature in *Lughat al-Tufūla wa l-Hulm* (*The Language of Childhood and Dreams*) (Rabāt: al-Sharika al-Maghribiyya li l-Nāshirīn al-Muttaḥidīn, 1986), 39–40.

it, but rather to create a false, more beautiful version of it, thereby convincing the audience that the search for alternatives is not necessary. In doing so, it does not admit that it is presenting a reading of the external world, but rather claims that it is transcribing that world. It is its very claim to truth; to representing reality, that renders it dishonest and harmful. The “narrators’ narrator” offers two bitterly humorous examples of this misuse of language—and an alternative. He selects three press releases from an assortment of documents which he says “the writer” gave him: two undated, and the last from 1978. The first is a traditionally constructed piece, full of hyperbole and sonorous language, praising the beauty and goodness of the land, the wonderful life of its citizens, and the wisdom and courage of its rulers. It exhorts its readers to ignore any other versions of reality but its own, even if their own lives contradict it. The second is a description of a beauty pageant in the Rabat-Hilton, which makes extravagant claims for itself as well as the event it is reporting, which “history will record in golden letters” as a sign of the great wisdom of the government. The various gorgeous body-parts of the contestants indicate the degree of civilization, modernity, and ethereal beauty which this government is leading the nation towards, and should fill all citizens with great pride. Finally, and in sharp contrast, is a short report in simple, modest, straightforward language on the continued diverting of water from the local population of a small tribal village to the luscious gardens of the bureaucrats in the water-bureau. (90–93) This last piece, besides offering a wonderful contrast to the first two reports, perhaps also indicates that it is not impossible to speak “the truth”, to use language to reveal rather than conceal, to address a reality beyond the text, and to at least attempt to bring about positive change.

The inadequacy of language is not always a result of a deliberate attempt to conceal or distort; of its misuse in the political or public sphere, but also lies in what is seen as an essentially problematic relationship between it and the reality it is trying to express. Hādī, a leftist journalist, exhibits the typical anxieties of the post-modern writer surrounding language.<sup>11</sup> He is obsessed with the relationship of words to images and emotions, and their ability, and

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<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the increasing awareness of the problematic relationship between language and reality and how it is reflected in various critical schools as well as in Lacanian thought, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*

sometimes inadequacy to express and communicate. He has experienced the power of words, and the imaginary worlds which they can create and invoke. He has been thrilled to the core from early on with the simple yet highly evocative words used by his uncle in tales which opened up new worlds, and in the stories he read as a child which had a deep and lasting effect over him. He knows that words can be prior to things, can precede objects and create these very images which he is now trying to recapture in language. Yet as a writer his relationship with language is characterized by struggle. Often all that he can recall are vague, legendary images that remain powerful in his memory, and although he thinks there must be words that are suitable for expressing these memories, his search for them is futile. In spite of “running panting” to collect the right words, things still seem vague and obscure. This leads him to question his writing, for it only seems to awaken in him a desire to search for “what the words have not touched”, which is much, and vital to him. (23–24) Words constantly seem to pale before the feelings he wants them to carry, and in some cases it seems as if using words to write about deep feelings distances him from these very feelings which he is trying to recapture. (36,140) He cannot translate the language of the heart into the language of words, and is searching desperately for a new language, which only seems possible in temporary suspended moments of flight, where he can forget or obliterate the human language of the past, and glimpse a new, hitherto unknown one. (143)<sup>12</sup>

#### METANARRATIVE EXPLORATIONS

Language presents one of several dilemmas that bring the issue of writing, and narrating, to the forefront of *The Game of Forgetting* which is characterized by the fact that its mode of production; its con-

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(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Pages 164–174 focus on language in Lacanian thought. James M. Mellard also gives a good outline of this subject in his introduction to *Using Lacan, Reading Fiction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 1–68, especially 6–20. See also Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, ed., *Lacan and the Subject of Language* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> In an introduction to Muḥammad Shukrī's collection of short stories *Majnūn al-Ward (Flower Crazy)* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1979) Barrāda discusses the issue of the limitations of language, but believes that simply asserting that words are inadequate is too easy an escape, for it cancels the necessity and importance of writing.

structedness, is discussed and explored within it. The reader is never allowed to indulge in the fantasy that s/he is the recipient of a transcribed set of events; a report on a fixed world. Rather, s/he is pushed into the role of witness, and participant, in the creation and recreation of the text, just as s/he is witnessing the creation, or constructedness, of the self. The tensions between the individual and the collective self, between the need for continuity and the desire for freedom and transformation, between the search for unity and the realization of the inevitability of multiplicity and fragmentation, are all reflected or echoed in the narrative structure on almost every level. That structure is itself characterized by tension, conflict, doubt, multiplicity, and the replacement of linearity with moments of consciousness that interlock and separate in unusual ways. Barrāda asserts the unconventionality of *The Game of Forgetting* when he calls it a “narrative text” (*naṣṣ riwā’ī*) instead of a novel. This refusal to confine the work within the limits of traditional genre and have it easily categorized, and instead to give it an ambiguous, indefinable status is an attempt, like that of the characters, to escape the fetters of history into the freedom of new forms.<sup>13</sup>

The narrative, and not only the self and the nation, is a process whose creation and transformation is unfolding before us. Instead of one beginning to *The Game of Forgetting*, we are offered three—“First Project of a Beginning”, “Second Project of a Beginning”, and “Then the Beginning became thus.” (16) From the first moment, then, the direction the narrative takes is shown as one out of several alternatives. The final version is essentially an artifact whose artifice the reader is allowed to witness. The narrative becomes, like the self, a construction with several possible beginnings, and perhaps also several possible destinations.<sup>14</sup> The common thread between the three beginnings, which is also true of the self, is that they all revolve around the mother, who is, according to the title of the section, *the beginning*. Moreover, beginnings and endings are linked and deliberately confused in *The Game of Forgetting*. The text begins, both physically and as a project, with an ending—the mother’s death, and

<sup>13</sup> A number of fiction writers in the Arab world are using the term “text” to describe their work. For example, Edwār al-Kharrāṭ gives *Turābuhā Zāfarān* (Its Sands Are Saffron) (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaqbal al-‘Arabī, 1986) the sub-title *Nuṣūṣ Iskandarāniyya* (Alexandrian Texts).

<sup>14</sup> On beginnings and intention, continuity, and authority in the novel as well as “the postnovelistic text” see Edward Said’s *Beginnings* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).

ends with “a moment of beginning.” The uncle’s death also is presented as both an ending and a beginning. (32) The loss that the death of parental figures generates is transformed into an opening up of the self through the writing process, and, “having been moved outside the circle of one, to move others.” Thus boundaries of identity are reconfigured through a forced confrontation with death.<sup>15</sup>

Multiple beginnings lead to other multiplicities in the narrative, for we have a plurality of voices or narrators who offer varied, and sometimes contradictory, perspectives. The voice allocated the largest narrative space, that of Hādī, usually, speaks in the sections entitled “Obscuration”, and these often come on the tail of the “Illumination” sections. The voices of the “Illuminations” are of unnamed characters, but appear to be those of neighbors or friends, people outside the family yet close to it. In all cases but one, they are the voices of women. The one exception is the “Illumination” describing the nephew’s wedding, whose narrator initially is ambiguous, but for which the “narrators’ narrator” later takes responsibility. (131) The naming of these sections is curious, for why is it that, contrary to conventional expectations, the outsiders’ voices illuminate, while that of the family member obscures? It may be that their very distance allows them a certain objectivity, and enables them to see the family from various points of view, so that their version of the events is more balanced in that it takes into consideration the sometimes contesting needs and desires of different family members simultaneously. The unreliability of the individual narrators becomes manifest, and is also compensated for, in the “Illuminations”. Indeed, this is the case in a number of instances where Hādī’s interpretations are obscured by his own need to see himself in a certain light. Perhaps even more important is that the “Illuminations” present us with a collective voice, even when it issues from one speaker. This collective voice of women, in its simplicity, self-assurance, and stability, is in sharp contrast to the complex, tortured, self-doubting individual voice of the “Obscuration.” It has a balancing effect on the narrative, and prevents it from disintegrating into chaos and total negativism. In addition, allowing the women to narrate—to be in control of the relation of the events and of making sense of them so to speak—reintroduces female agency and is a vital antidote to

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<sup>15</sup> Nancy K. Miller, “Facts, Pacts, Acts,” in *Profession*, 92: 13.

their presentation as constructed captives. *The Game of Forgetting* is a truly polyphonic narrative, where no one point of view is allowed to remain unchallenged for long.

The contentious relationship between “the author” and the “narrators’ narrator” introduces another major tension in *The Game of Forgetting*. These two are involved in an ongoing debate on what to include in the narrative, how it should be structured or controlled, and ultimately, what the purpose of writing is. Aside from adding a touch of humor, these discussions deny us the comfort of a single, harmonious, and authoritative reading of this work. The reader is not allowed the role of passive consumer, and instead has to work hard to produce and decipher meaning. According to the “narrators’ narrator”, “the writer”, whose voice we only hear through the former’s recounting, is seeking unity and clarity. Like Hādī, with whom the “narrators’ narrator” compares him (indeed, there are several points in the text when “the writer” and Hādī are conflated) he is concerned that language is inadequate in transmitting reality, and sees a tension between event and representation of the event, between word and word of that word, to borrow Barthes’ phrase. The “narrators’ narrator” views this search for unity and clarity as a false one, for although he can direct events and characters to create a coherent whole, this would be subverting reality for the sake of ideology. Life itself is diverse and incoherent, occurring on many levels simultaneously. If narration is to be accurate, then contradiction, inconsistency, and plurality are essential. (56–60, 89–90)<sup>16</sup>

Time, or how to write about “a finished time within an unfinished continuity” is another issue about which they seem unable to reach a conclusion. (130) “The author” feels a need to write in a more “realistic” fashion, by which he means including elements of time and space, or what he initially calls history, in the narrative. He

<sup>16</sup> Fragmentation as a hallmark of modern Arabic literature is currently being analyzed by a number of critics. See, for example, Kamal Abu-Deeb, “Cultural Creation in a Fragmented Society,” in *The Next Arab Decade: Alternative Futures*, ed. Hisham Sharabi (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 160–181. Marilyn Booth, in her introduction to her collection of translations of short stories by Egyptian women writers, makes note of their “concept of reality which privileges the changing, the uncertain, and the fragmented over the stable, the controllable, and the unified.” *My Grandmother’s Cactus* (London: Quartet Books, 1991), 10. And Barrāda himself analyzes the fragmented nature of Muḥammad Shukrī’s narrative in his introduction to *Majnūn al-Ward*, 5–18.

believes that to exclude or ignore the time-frame in which the characters are living, and which influences and directs their thoughts and actions, is unacceptable. The “narrators’ narrator”, however, seems to hold opinions similar to those of the advocates of the *nouveau roman*. He wants to focus on interiors, and sees no significance in external events except their reverberations in the psyche of the characters. Moreover, he says:

History has more than one level or stream, and seldom does it really coincide with what happens on the surface and is represented by resounding events. You still live in a society that has not yet written its ancient history, let alone the fact that its modern history is surrounded with secrecy and its documents are hidden in sealed vaults so that the people of this kingdom will remain preoccupied with their future. And historians, as you know, keep changing their ink from time to time.

The author replied: I agree with what you say, but what I mean is not history but rather certain elements which determine the atmosphere of the time we live in, although we do not claim to understand it. Perhaps this is acting like a parrot but it may help us to discover what is behind the prominent qualities.

I said impatiently: And what are these features that you want to present as prominent qualities of this other time?

He said: What everyone knows, what is widespread and repeated by everyone and often by newspapers, radio, and television. For example, the group of billionaires that has come upon us a few years ago and that we’ve begun to know from news leaked out about parties thrown by everyone whose wealth reached the threshold of a billion. One individual may give such parties dozens of times. Isn’t that a sign of dynamism and a vital initiative to which the period of independence has given opportunity?

I interrupted him objecting: Speaking about this phenomenon will be considered as a kind of calumny against the reputation of certain high state officials, and this may cause you difficulties which you are not ready to face . . . Why do you want to open a door, from which nothing but pain and headache will come to you, although you want only to write about the game of forgetting and about the methods of avoiding what is painful? (128–129)

Thus talking about history, and whether it should have a place in the narrative and to what extent, brings up the subject of censorship, and the writer’s responsibility, and the limits to his ability in confronting it. For, the “narrators’ narrator” proceeds to ask, what version of history should they include? The official version, which is basically false, or a more honest one, thereby risking problems with

the censor? (129–131) On this subject “the author” seems deliberately dense, or perhaps ironic, and here there are obviously external factors determining the tone of the narrative. Nevertheless, it is critical that this issue is introduced, since censorship in its various guises is an important factor determining the mode of production of the text, and thus falls within the aesthetic and ideological concerns of *The Game of Forgetting*.<sup>17</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: A MOST SERIOUS GAME

Finally, “the author”’s desires for unity, coherence, and a historical frame of reference, lead the “narrators’ narrator” to question the motives behind his writing, which he sees as an attempt to falsify reality and make it seem beautiful. (53) “The author”, on the other hand, finds it difficult to accept the ambivalence and anarchy ensuing from the these beliefs. Between the two of them, these contesting parts of Barrāda himself perhaps, the question is asked, why write, and how is writing possible? This question sums up and epitomizes the tension, expressed on all levels in the narrative, between accepting our state of cultural captivity but refusing to allow it to imprison us in passivity and nihilism. Framed as it is within concrete issues of censorship, the question of the real need for societal change in a post-colonial era replete with problems of inequality, poverty, oppression, stagnation, and an identity crisis on both the personal and the national levels, adds immediacy and poignancy to the more general postmodern anxieties voiced in the text. Thus, in

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<sup>17</sup> On how the writer’s struggles with censorship are translated into his work and become an important part of it, see Samia Mehrez, “Sun‘allāh Ibrāhīm wa Riwayāt Tārikh al-Riwāya,” (Sonallah Ibrahim and the Novel of the History of the Novel) in *Fuṣūl*, 11:1 (Spring 92): 170–180. Mehrez has been recently embroiled in another case of censorship against the other leading contemporary Moroccan writer, Muhammad Shukrī, when she taught his autobiographical novel *Al-Khubz al-Hāfi* (English translation *For Bread Alone*) in one of her classes at the American University in Cairo. Upon the complaints of a number of parents that the book was pornographic (in December 98), the American administration of the university wanted her to remove the book from the syllabus. When she refused, the story erupted in the press, and ultimately the minister of higher education had to intervene. The case has not entirely been settled yet, and has produced much public debate on academic freedom. Unfortunately, this has not been an isolated incident, and points to a new form of censorship, where the books are published and sold, but deemed inappropriate for “young” students at universities.

distinction from western texts where postmodernity and commitment often seem to be mutually exclusive, we have here a narrative that is postmodern in sensibility and structure, but is also fiercely concerned with the here and now and committed to struggling for its improvement. One can even say that using the visible dilemmas faced by a developing nation in a state of turmoil as the site for articulating the anxieties associated with the notions of constructedness or cultural captivity complicate the postmodern dilemma and allow us to see new facets of it. For just as “the author” may agree with the views of the “narrators’ narrator” but find it difficult to accept the results as they translate into specific narrative choices, so too can an Arab writer simultaneously accept but find unacceptable some western postmodernist tendencies such as total relativism and the production of texts that are divorced from the surrounding reality. What then is the answer to the question why write? The answer, like the answers to the rest of the questions raised by *The Game of Forgetting*, when any are offered at all, may not be entirely positive, for there is no easy affirmation that literature can transform reality, but it is also one that refuses to relinquish what is seen to be the writer’s, indeed every human’s, responsibility as well as need. Perhaps the notion that we are creating a new language and transcending history is only an illusion, but it is an illusion that is necessary. We cannot abandon the struggle with and for our world. Our writing may not change ritual into reality, but if we move out of the game, then “our narration is thus replaced by the silence of death.” (37)

## POSTMODERNING THE TRADITIONAL IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SHAYKH KISHK<sup>1</sup>

FEDWA MALTI-DOUGLAS

The Islamist movement has redefined contemporary religious and political trends on the global scene. Yet, few Western observers have noted the deep influence that this transnational movement has had on the literary map of the Muslim world. A new Islamic literature has grown up to challenge the previously largely secular orientation of modern Arabic literature, and it has done so in virtually all the genres of that literature. Within this generic range, autobiography has held a privileged place for Islamic writers, both male and female. It is no surprise, therefore, that the popular blind Egyptian preacher, Shaykh ‘Abd Ḥamīd Kishk, has also indulged in this genre. The autobiography of Shaykh Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī: Mudhakkirāt al-Shaykh Kīshk* (The Story of My Days: Memoirs of Shaykh Kishk),<sup>2</sup> is a masterful example of the postmodern autobiography, one that centers on a contemporary character but yet exploits traditional materials from the centuries-old Arabo-Islamic *turāth*, the revered textual tradition extending from philosophy to theology, from literary anecdote to dream narrative. The exploitation of the complex *turāth* creates a synchrony in the discourse, one which, as we shall have occasion to demonstrate, telescopes the diachronic, permitting events from the Arabo-Islamic past to comment on the contemporary world and vice versa.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier and much briefer version of this study was delivered at a conference, “Cultural Transitions: The Articulation of Religious and Secular Discourses in the Middle East,” at The American University, December 9, 1989. A publication was made of the conference papers: *Cultural Transitions in the Middle East*, ed. Serif Mardin (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994). For that publication, the transliteration of my text was drastically (and hilariously) redone without my permission or knowledge. I am grateful to Dr. Peri Bearman at E.J. Brill for having released the copy-right to the earlier—and shorter—version. I would also like to take this opportunity to formally express my gratitude to Dr. Yūsuf Ibīsh for his kindness and intellectual generosity. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī: Mudhakkirāt al-Shaykh Kīshk* (Cairo: Dār al-Mukhtār al-Islāmī, 1987? 1988?).

Blindness, prison, politics, dreams: these are only a few of the elements that make Shaykh Kishk's autobiographical narrative a rich and complex literary construction, one that forms part of the by-now extensive corpus of texts that have emanated from the Islamist movement. An exploration of certain moments in this autobiography will demonstrate the importance of the verbal and civilization interplays in the text, and in particular those attached to the world of dreams. This world will be central in bringing together the political and the personal in this contemporary autobiography.

Shaykh 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk has achieved a species of omnipresence. Dubbed by Gilles Kepel the "star of Islamic preaching" and by Bruno Etienne the prototypical preacher, he now surfaces in practically all Western works on the religious revival; and thanks to modern technology, his recorded voice carries his message all over the globe.<sup>3</sup> As early as the 1970's, Kishk's influence was wide-ranging and copies of his sermons were distributed as far away as Jordan.<sup>4</sup> 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk, like other contemporary—and equally prominent—religious personalities (Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī, Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, to name but three),<sup>5</sup> has a facility with the pen. He has authored innumerable books and pamphlets, including a series on religious injunctions (*fatāwā*) dealing with a Muslim's daily concerns.<sup>6</sup>

But it is especially Shaykh Kishk's autobiography which will help us to examine a new emerging relationship between Islam and modern literature. The close and occasionally problematic relationship between Islam and literature has a long history, going back to the Prophet and his dealings with the poets of his own time. In recent years, our attention has tended to be monopolized by controversies

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Le Prophète et Pharaon* (Paris: La Découverte, 1984), 165–182. Bruno Etienne, in *L'Islamisme radical* (Paris: Hachette, 1987), has dubbed Kishk the prototypical *khaṭīb*, e.g. among others, 265.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Richard Antoun, *Muslim Preacher in the Modern World: A Jordanian Case Study in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 94.

<sup>5</sup> All three of these male figures, al-Sha'rāwī, Maḥmūd, and al-Qaraḍāwī, have published extensively. Their works range from the didactic and polemic to the personal and literary. A glance at any catalogue will verify this.

<sup>6</sup> In the back of his autobiography (the subject of this present study), Kishk lists forty-five books that he has published at the time of completion of the autobiographical text. But the number of books he has authored has by now increased tremendously. See Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī*, 265–286. His multi-volume collection of *fatāwā* are in 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk, *Fatāwā al-Shaykh Kishk* (Cairo: Dār al-Mukhtār al-Islāmī, n.d.), vols. 1 forward.

such as that surrounding Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*<sup>7</sup> or more appropriately for an Arabic context that which grew around *Awlād Ḥāratinā* (translated as *Children of Gebelawi*) by the 1988 Nobel Laureate Najīb Maḥfūz.<sup>8</sup> Even Kishk has seen himself become embroiled in this controversy, having authored a book in which he criticizes his compatriot's work.<sup>9</sup> Our problematic differs. We are examining a sophisticated autobiographical text, written by a well-known Muslim activist, in an attempt to understand questions related to Islamic literature, and particularly autobiography.

What do we mean by Islamic literature? And what is its relation to modern Arabic literature in general? Modern Arabic literature was initially mediated through European, and hence, non-Islamic, narrative forms.<sup>10</sup> Partly as a result, it was frequently secular, or at least extra-religious, in character. From phases of social realism, stream of consciousness, etc., modern Arabic prose has evolved into new formal domains. One of these is a distinctive brand of metafiction and postmodernism that exploits and manipulates the rich textual tradition, the *turāth*.<sup>11</sup> This highly evocative word, which literally means "heritage," englobes works ranging from the theologico-philosophical through the literary and the historical to the biographical and philological. This enormous medieval literary production (far larger than the production of the Latin West during the same centuries) included texts ranging from the profane to the religious in character. But, as the creations of a civilization that was fundamentally Islamic in ethos, these works stand not only for tradition but also, to a considerable degree, for Islamic tradition.

<sup>7</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking, 1988); *The Rushdie File*, eds. Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> Najīb Maḥfūz, *Awlād Ḥāratinā* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1967), translated as Naguib Mahfouz, *Children of Gebelawi*, trans. Philip Stewart (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1981). See, for example, Muhammad Jalāl Kishk, *Awlād Ḥāratinā fihā Qawlān* (Cairo: al-Zahrā' li l-Īlām wa l-Nashr, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk, *Kalimatunā fī al-Radd 'alā Awlād Ḥāratinā: Najīb Maḥfūz* (Cairo: al-Mukhtār al-Islāmī, 1994). I have discussed the iconography of this work elsewhere. See Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "Islam, Literature—and Politics," *The World and I*, 12 (1997): 68–75.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction*, 2nd edition (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 11–51.

<sup>11</sup> See Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "Min al-Tārīkh al-Sirrī li-Nu'mān 'Abd al-Ḥāfīz wa-Tadmīr Tuqūs al-Hayāt wa l-Lugha," *Ibdā'*, 1, 6–7 (1983), 86–92. The Pharaonic heritage can be exploited as well. See, for example, Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "Yusūf al-Qa'īd wa l-Riwāya al-Jadīda," *Fuṣūl*, IV, 3 (1984), 190–202.

The name that has put this trend of evoking the *turāth* in modern literature on the literary map is without doubt that of the contemporary Egyptian, Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī, with his pseudo-Mamlūk narratives.<sup>12</sup> Even Najīb Maḥfūz is wont to indulge in this literary practice.<sup>13</sup> But this textual game has not evaded writers from other parts of the Arab world: the Palestinian Emile Habiby (d. 1996) and the Tunisian Maḥmūd al-Mis‘adī, are but two of its more brilliant players.<sup>14</sup> Hence, in the domain of fiction, there has been in recent years a conscious attempt on the part of Arabic writers to draw from the *turāth*. More interestingly, the rich centuries-long heritage has also attracted the attention of secular women writers, such as the prominent feminist physician-writer, Dr. Nawal El Saadawi.<sup>15</sup> In her most recent fiction, El Saadawi exploits the *turāth* to construct a postmodern fictional universe which seeks to redefine age-old patriarchal religious structures. This she does most obviously in both *Suqūṭ al-Imām* (*The Fall of the Imam*) and in *Jannāt wa-Iblīs* (translated as *The Innocence of the Devil*).<sup>16</sup>

Yet these textual games are not always innocent, nor does the *turāth* escape completely unmarred in this literary exercise. Let us not forget before we speak about contemporary writers that medieval characters in the much-beloved anecdotal collections had no compunction about playing with the *turāth*.<sup>17</sup> In fact, this ludic element is not

<sup>12</sup> Al-Ghīṭānī is without doubt one of the most prolific of contemporary Arabic authors and most of his fictional world is imbued with Mamlūkiana. The three best examples of this trend are Jamāl al-Ghīṭānī: *al-Ḥaynī Barakāt* (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaḥbal al-‘Arabī, 1985), *Khīṭaṭ al-Ghīṭānī* (Beirut: Dār al-Masīra, 1981), *Kitāb al-Tajallīyyāt*, vols. I–III (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaḥbal al-‘Arabī, 1983–1988).

<sup>13</sup> The most complex Maḥfūzian intertextual use of the *turāth* is in a cycle of dreams, “Ra’aytu fīmā Yarā al-Nā’im,” in Najīb Maḥfūz, *Ra’aytu fīmā Yarā al-Nā’im* (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1982). See, also, Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Maḥfouz’s Dreams,” in *Naguīb Maḥfouz: From Regional Fame to Global Recognition*, eds. Michael Beard and Adnan Haydar (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993), 126–143 (text), 183–185 (notes).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Imīl Ḥabībī, *Ikhtayyi* (Cyprus: Kitāb al-Karmil, 1985); Maḥmūd al-Mis‘adī, *Haddatha Abū Hurayra Qāl* (Tunis: Dār al-Janūb li l-Nashr, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> Since Nawal El Saadawi has anglicized her name, I use that anglicized form here, except in the citation of Arabic sources.

<sup>16</sup> Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī, *Suqūṭ al-Imām* (Cairo: Dār al-Mustaḥbal al-‘Arabī, 1987), translated as Nawal El Saadawi, *The Fall of the Imam*, trans. Sherif Hetata (London: Methuen, 1988); Nawāl al-Sa‘dāwī, *Jannāt wa-Iblīs* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 1986), translated as Nawal El Saadawi, *The Innocence of the Devil*, trans. Sherif Hetata (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), especially 91–140.

<sup>17</sup> On some of these intertextual games, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Playing with

nearly as prevalent today as it was in the medieval texts. Nevertheless, twentieth-century authors, like Habiby, confess to even having changed the medieval citations, in an attempt to heighten the power of a contemporary text.<sup>18</sup> And the feminist El Saadawi does the same.<sup>19</sup>

But writers like El Saadawi, al-Ghīṭānī, and Habiby are all swimming in a fictional universe, when it comes to exploiting the *turāth*. Their complex narratives are, therefore, playing on two registers. On the one hand, they are utilizing the outward form of various genres which, as we have already noted, have been considered traditionally Western, like the novel and the short story. On the other hand, these narratives are imbued with materials emanating from the non-Western Arabo-Islamic tradition. Clearly, the tension between these two registers adds greatly to the intricacy of these fictional narratives.

Unlike most modern fictional genres, autobiography draws on an indigenous Arabo-Islamic tradition, spanning a wide chronological as well as literary range. Medieval autobiographies, like the justly famed spiritual saga, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), stand alongside innumerable modern life stories.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, this genre has undergone radical transformations, ones in a sense that parallel social and cultural concerns: an increased emphasis on the individual and a heightened awareness of the “I” in the narrative. The autobiographical ethos changes from the medieval to the modern.<sup>21</sup> In these terms, Kishk’s autobiography belongs to the modern genre.

The area of Islamic literature (*adab islāmī*), until now largely occulted in the Western critical corpus has had nevertheless, over the past few years, a lively existence in the Arabic-speaking world. Briefly, this is a programmatic literature written from a consciously Islamic perspective and encompassing novels, short stories, poetry, and drama.<sup>22</sup>

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the Sacred: Religious Intertext in *Adab* Discourse,” in *Humanism, Culture, and Language in the Near East: Studies in Honor of Georg Krotkoff*, eds. Asma Afsaruddin and A.H. Mathias Zahniser (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 51–59.

<sup>18</sup> Allen Douglas and Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Literature and Politics: A Conversation with Emile Habiby,” in *The Arabic Novel Since 1950*, ed. Issa Boullata, *Mundus Arabicus*, 5 (1992): 11–46.

<sup>19</sup> See Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s)*, 91–117.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha, 1965).

<sup>21</sup> On the Arabic autobiographical tradition and the difference between the modern and the classical spirits, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography: al-Ayyām of Tāhā Husayn* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 9–11.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the series “Naḥwa Adab Islāmī ‘Ālamī,” published by al-Wafā’ li l-Ṭibā‘a wa l-Nashr (al-Mansūra).

Its defenders see it as a new form of committed or “engagé” literature, in this case, however, committed to Islamic, rather than secular leftist, political goals.<sup>23</sup> The proliferation of Islamic autobiographical writings (including at the limit the personal travel account) make this perhaps the most important form of this new literary trend.

Nor is this trend towards barring the self-restricted to male writers. Female writers of the Islamic revival abound, adding their spiritual testimonies to those of the males. And these are by no means geographically restricted: one finds them to be as prevalent in Europe as they are in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>24</sup> Up till now, the most prominent of these figures in the West has undoubtedly been Zaynab al-Ghazālī, whose popular work, *Ayyām min Ḥayātī* (Days from my Life) has even attracted some critical attention. Zaynab al-Ghazālī’s extremely important text, which has gone into multiple editions, predates the current Islamist wave and functions more as a precursor and an important antecedent to the current Islamist writings rather than being in a direct dialogue with them.<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps then not a surprise that her name overshadows that of many others in much of the Western discourse on women and Islam.<sup>26</sup>

This is certainly not to downplay Zaynab al-Ghazālī’s important role. It is simply to note that the movement of Islamic literature, of which Shaykh Kishk’s autobiography is a part, has achieved a certain critical mass, if only in the number of works produced and their market impact.<sup>27</sup> What makes ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk’s *The Story of*

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Muhammad Ra’fat Sa’īd, *al-Itizām fī al-Taṣawwur al-Islāmī li l-Adab* (Cairo: Dār al-Hidāya li l-Ṭibā’a wa l-Nashr wa l-Tawzī’, 1987); Muḥammad Qūṭb, *Manhaj al-Fann al-Islāmī* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> See Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *A Woman and Her Sūfīs* (Georgetown University: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. Occasional Papers, 1995). See Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Medicines of the Soul: Female Bodies and Sacred Geographies in a Transnational Islam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, forthcoming).

<sup>25</sup> Zaynab al-Ghazālī, *Ayyām min Ḥayātī*, 9th edition (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> A few examples will suffice to demonstrate this point. See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 196ff.; Sherifa Zuhur, *Revealing Reveiling: Islamist Gender Ideology in Contemporary Egypt* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 84ff. See also, Valerie J. Hoffman, “An Islamic Activist: Zaynab al-Ghazali,” in *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change*, ed. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1985), 233–254; Miriam Cooke, “Prisons: Egyptian Women Writers on Islam,” *Religion and Literature*, special issue on “The Literature of Islam,” 20 (1988): 139–153; Miriam Cooke, “Zaynab al-Ghazali: Saint or Subversive?,” *Die Welt des Islams*, 34 (1994): 1–20.

<sup>27</sup> Statistically, in Arab countries, sales of Islamic books far outnumber those of secular ones.

*My Days* Islamic is not simply its commitment to Islam but the way in which the preacher/hero constructs his odyssey. Narrated in the first-person, the writing of the text was completed on July 6, 1986. Though bearing the subtitle *Memoirs . . .* (Mudhakkirāt . . .), the work is clearly an autobiography. First, the Arabic word “mudhakkirāt” is not as restrictive as its translation into English would suggest. After all, the third volume of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s classic autobiography, *al-Ayyām*, initially bore the title *Mudhakkirāt*.<sup>28</sup> Further, memoirs display a different emphasis—on the evenemential or historical, rather than the personal development of the hero.

No doubt exists about the autobiographical nature of Kishk’s book. After a brief introduction by ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk, the author, the first-person hero/narrator enters the text. After two lines of declaring his intent to write this life story that is his and seeking God’s guidance, he begins: “The name: ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Muḥammad Kishk.” This onomastic declaration is followed by the birth information and family background.<sup>29</sup> This self-introduction is crucial, setting as it does the identity of the central character and narrator of this autobiography. More than that, it establishes the solidity of the pact so critical in autobiography, in which the reader is assured that the author, the central character, and the narrator are one and the same individual.<sup>30</sup> What more efficacious way to establish this identity than to set down the onomastic elements that will seal this identity once and for all?

The critic undertaking an analysis of autobiography must not be misled, however, into forgetting that an autobiography is a constructed text and not merely a seemingly straightforward presentation of someone’s life. That means that we need to remember that the narrator has a textual identity that must be kept separate from that of the author. To facilitate this task, we shall follow the normal critical usage that reserves the first name, here ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, for the character and narrator and the full name or family name, here Shaykh Kishk or Kishk, for the author.

This contemporary life that unfolds before us reads at times like

<sup>28</sup> Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Mudhakkirāt Ṭāhā Husayn* (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, n.d.). See Malti-Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography*, 13 and note 32 on that same page.

<sup>29</sup> Kishk, *Qissat Ayyāmī*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> On the importance of the autobiographical pact, see Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975), 13–46; Philippe Lejeune, “Le pacte autobiographique (bis),” *Poétique*, 56 (1983), 416–434.

a medieval anecdotal *adab* collection, designed at once to be didactic and entertaining<sup>31</sup> (and not a medieval autobiography): an anecdote from the contemporary period is placed alongside one from the classical sources, which is in turn placed alongside a *ḥadīth* or a verse from the Qurʾān. The autobiography is divided into six parts, and highly fragmented. (In a book of 258 pages, there are 156 separate sections, each labeled.) Such a division of a larger text into relatively small, frequently labeled, units, was a distinguishing feature of classical Arabic prose which tended to avoid the continuous extended narrative. Though Kishk's autobiography does display a chronological order, it nevertheless gives the reader the impression of being discontinuous. This is by no means an uncommon phenomenon in modern or even postmodern autobiography.<sup>32</sup> Roland Barthes in his richly allusive *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* exploits this fragmentation as does Ihab Hassan in his masterful *Out of Egypt*.<sup>33</sup> Nor is this to say that there is no chronological continuity in the narrator's textual saga. The opposite is the case. The trajectory of the life displayed before our eyes develops from childhood to adulthood. This produces a tension within a seemingly fragmented text that nevertheless progresses diachronically.

But unique in the modern or even postmodern context is the intensity of the Kishkian narrator's literary relationship to the entirety of the Arabo-Islamic heritage, the *turāth*, that is permanently at his finger tips. Not one of its areas does he leave dormant: this astute narrator glides over the *turāth*, isolating and redefining that enormous tradition—in all its aspects—from the literary to the historical, and from the oniric to the onomastic. The intertext in all its various guises is present, as inspiration, as stylistic or direct borrowing, or even at times simply as allusion. That one cannot hope to penetrate this textual world without some forays into the rich Arabo-Islamic tradition should become self-evident. Hence, the preacher's autobiography occupies a unique, almost anomalous posi-

<sup>31</sup> On a definition of *adab* and an *adab* discourse, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Structures of Avarice: The Bukhalā' in Medieval Arabic Literature* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), 7–16.

<sup>32</sup> For an interesting discussion of this problem, especially as it concerns women's autobiographies, see Domna Stanton, "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?," in *The Female Autograph*, ed. Domna Stanton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 11.

<sup>33</sup> *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1975); Ihab Hassan, *Out of Egypt* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).

tion. While its coherent and developmental focus on the individual are classically modern, its organizational fragmentation shares features with (while remaining essentially distinct from) both classical Arabic composite prose and postmodern fragmentation.

‘Abd al-Ḥamīd’s saga is made of material that is the stuff of success stories.<sup>34</sup> Losing his sight relatively early in life, this precocious youngster who memorized the Qur’ān at the age of twelve goes on to become a successful preacher. His words inflame the political leadership of his country and he is arrested and incarcerated. The prison experience, a merit badge of sorts in Egyptian society, is central to the life story we see unfolding before us. The blind hero has the dubious honor of having been in prison under both Nasser and Sadat. And the autobiography chronicles this stormy life from the birth of its protagonist in 1933 until 1986, the time of its writing. One of the tensions in *The Story of My Days* is created by the presence of what we might call the programmatic agenda of its preacher/hero that is Kishk and the personal odyssey of its textual character, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd.

The integration of the intertext at times creates interesting ambiguities in the narrative. When ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd is asked by a prison guard if the latter would be in the wrong if he beat him to death under orders, our preacher answers his questioner, attempting at the same time to sway him from “his satanic thoughts.” Then follows a story with the medieval jurist Mālik ibn Anas, a moral about how a Muslim should behave, and a Qur’ānic quote.<sup>35</sup> Is the story of Mālik for the eyes of the reader only? Or was it addressed to the guard? The ambiguity is never resolved, but it does serve a purpose: it suggests an identity between the situation that ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd encounters and that of Mālik ibn Anas. From the present, we have moved to the past, but a past that serves as a discourse on this present. However, a further step is then added: a commentary that helps to transform the single incident or story into a general state.

In fact, the discourse of the autobiography is so intertextually imbued with the *turāth* that classical (especially Qur’ānic) structures

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<sup>34</sup> For brief sketches of Kishk’s biography that precede the writing and publication of the autobiography, see J.J.G. Jansen, “The voice of Sheikh Kishk (b. 1933),” in *The Challenge of the Middle East*, eds. Ibrahim A. El-Sheikh, C. Aart van de Koppel and Rudolph Peters (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Institute for Modern Near Eastern Studies, 1982), 58–59; Kepel, *Le Prophète*, 167–169.

<sup>35</sup> Kishk, *Qiṣṣat Ayyāmī*, 85–86.

and formulations become assimilated into the contemporary Kishkian discourse. When discussing the Prophet's wife Khadīja and her faithfulness, the narrator begins with: "And Khadīja . . . What is Khadīja? And what will teach you what she is?"<sup>36</sup> This is a recognizably Qur'ānic construction, quite common in Kishk's text, and which interestingly enough also finds its way into Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's autobiography.<sup>37</sup> Although this present study does not purport to be a gender-conscious reading of *The Story of My Days*, it is still worth calling attention to the fact that Khadīja is treated as a "what" (*mā*) and not a "who" (*man*). While it could be argued that the *man* would have detracted from the power of the classical construction and might have made it unrecognizable for a modern reader, it is nevertheless striking in that Khadīja is simply there as a symbol of fidelity. Personification would turn her into too much of an individual, something she is not in this twentieth-century male narrative. In fact, she is coterminous with it ("If fidelity is mentioned, it is Khadīja; and if she is mentioned, she is fidelity").<sup>38</sup>

At times, the Kishkian narrator simply interpolates Qur'ānic phrases into his own sentences without any sort of attribution. The structures of the Holy Book become part of the everyday discourse of a contemporary preacher. In explaining that he is not one to endorse complexity in religious doctrines and tenets, the narrator adds that the Qur'ān and the *sunna* contain everything. After all, who can inform us about God better than God himself and his Prophet? "Guidance in the Qur'ān is clear like the sun in its morning brightness, and in the *sunna* it is radiant like the moon when it follows it."<sup>39</sup> Here, the narrator is integrating the words and the structures from the Qur'ānic Sūra 91, Sūrat al-Shams, verses 1–3, into his own speech ("By the sun and its morning brightness/and by the moon when it follows it,/and by the day when it displays it").<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Kishk, *Qiṣṣat Ayyāmī*, 31.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Kishk, *Qiṣṣat Ayyāmī*, 180. For the presence of this construction in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's autobiography and its general importance in other texts, see Malti-Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography*, 155–156.

<sup>38</sup> Kishk, *Qiṣṣat Ayyāmī*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Kishk, *Qiṣṣat Ayyāmī*, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Qur'ān (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1966), Sūra 91/Sūrat al-Shams, verses 1–3. For a discussion of the repetitions in this *sūra*, see J. Christoph Bürgel, "Repetitive Structures in Early Arabic Prose," in *Critical Pilgrimages: Studies in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, ed. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Literature East and West*, 25 (1989): 51.

This intertextual technique is tantamount to recasting (dare we say rewriting?) the Holy Book. These textual games are not restricted to sacred texts but span the medieval Arabic rhetorical tradition as well. Shaykh Kishk assumes from his reader wide and deep knowledge of the *turāth*. When talking about journalism, the narrator states that its slogan is: “the most agreeable poetry is the most mendacious (*al-dhab al-shiʿr akdhabuhu*).”<sup>41</sup> This is an allusion to the much-debated classical Arabic poetico-rhetorical phrase: “the best poetry is the most mendacious” (*aḥsan al-shiʿr akdhabuhu*).<sup>42</sup> Journalism is, of course, a distinctively modern phenomenon, associated with the rise of mass society, nationalism, and the modern secular state. Linking it with poetry under the dual sign of lying creates an attack on an aesthetic, entertainment-oriented use of language, as contrasted with the truth-embodying sacred word.

The heavy intertextual usage of the *turāth* should not mask the overriding unity of the story. *The Story of My Days* is first and foremost the narrative of a blind boy made good (and from an Islamic perspective this is undoubtedly the case). As such, it is, in a certain sense, embedded in the Egyptian literary/textual subconscious, hence, familiar to Arab readers. After all, is this not what Ṭāhā Ḥusayn’s odyssey is all about?<sup>43</sup> But, there is a radical difference in the articulation of the two life stories. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn is the premier modernizer, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk, a traditionalist preacher. His is the role from which Ṭāhā Ḥusayn ran away with all his might, that of blind *shaykh*.<sup>44</sup> Yet, oddly enough, the two figures do cross autobiographical paths, as we shall have occasion to see.

But to say that the autobiography of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk is simply a religiously inspired rewriting of that by his compatriot Ṭāhā Ḥusayn would be misleading at best and would detract from the individual literary qualities of both works. In fact, the stuff that makes Kishk into a star orator is also what makes him recount his

<sup>41</sup> Kishk, *Qiṣṣat Ayyāmī*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> J. Christoph Bürgel has presented a masterful treatment of this literary debate in his “Die beste Dichtung ist die lügenreichste: Wesen und Bedeutung eines literarischen Streites des arabischen Mittelalters im Lichte komparatischer Betrachtung,” *Oriens*, 23 (1974): 7–102.

<sup>43</sup> For an analysis of this monumental autobiography, see Malti-Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography*.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *al-Ayyām*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1974), 143–144; Malti-Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography*, 37, 45.

autobiography with zest and humor. His superior preaching skills are clearly imprinted on his own account of his life.

And yet Shaykh Kishk and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn share a corporal handicap: blindness. And some of the more moving incidents in Kishk's autobiography are those relating directly to this blindness. The handicap itself, like other incidents in the text, becomes the locus in which the traditional and the modern are free to interact. When the narrator's right eye begins to show signs of weakness, he starts a soliloquy on what he fears will await him. "What will I do," he repeatedly wonders as he questions his education, his movements, and finally his being "subject to two prisons (*rahīn al-mahbasayn*): the house and blindness."<sup>45</sup> This Arabic phrase, *rahīn al-mahbasayn*, is not original with the contemporary preacher: it was almost an identity card for the great medieval Syrian blind poet, Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d. 449/1058), who applied it to himself.<sup>46</sup> This indirect linkage to al-Ma'arrī in the very first pages of the autobiography is interesting indeed. The medieval poet was known as a *zindīq*, an unbeliever.<sup>47</sup> And, although this exact phrase does not appear in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's *al-Ayyām*, Abū al-'Alā' was also the point of identity drawn from the tradition for that Egyptian modernizer.<sup>48</sup> It is as if we were in a situation of reverse mirrors: identification without the phrase in *al-Ayyām*, the phrase without direct identification in *Qiṣṣat Ayyāmī*. Blindness makes strange bedfellows.

One of the most searing episodes in Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's self-story is the account of the onset of his blindness. The Egyptian modernizer blames this squarely on traditional society and folk medical practices, an association present in other autobiographies of blind third world intellectuals.<sup>49</sup> The other side of this coin, modern medical science as a cure for blindness, is developed in the popular Egyptian novella, *Qindil Umm Hāshim* by Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī.<sup>50</sup> In Shaykh Kishk's autobiography, the narrator turns this modern Egyptian topos upside

<sup>45</sup> Kishk, *Qiṣṣat Ayyāmī*, 9.

<sup>46</sup> See, for example, al-Ṣafadī, *Nakt al-Himyān fī Nukat al-'Umyān*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī (Cairo: al-Maṭba'at al-Jamāliyya, 1911), 103.

<sup>47</sup> On al-Ma'arrī's religious beliefs, see R.A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 194, 196–197.

<sup>48</sup> See Malti-Douglas, *Blindness and Autobiography*, 23–25, 27, 30, 42, 159–161.

<sup>49</sup> See Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "al-'Amā' fī Mir'āt al-Tarjama al-Shakḥiyya: Ṭāhā Ḥusayn wa-Ved Mehta," *Fuṣūl*, III, 4 (1983): 61–80.

<sup>50</sup> Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī, *Qindil Umm Hāshim* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmma li l-Kitāb, 1975).

down. He explains in detail the failure of an operation designed to restore his eyesight. This failure becomes one of modernity. The physician, a Muslim, performed the procedure at the time of the Friday noon prayer and he was the surgeon who had been so much talked up by the newspapers (this was the occasion for the reference to the mendacity of journalists).<sup>51</sup> In modern Egypt, physicians vie with army officers (and, of course, preachers) as symbols of authority.<sup>52</sup> The prominence of the mosque and its personnel implies the lower status of its competitors.

The visual handicap is not the only site in which synchrony plays a major role. The intertextual intricacies in 'Abd al-Ḥamīd's life story go beyond the personal to comment on the world of Egyptian politics. During a lecture at 'Ayn Shams University, our preacher is asked whether socialism is part of Islam. "And socialism then was a religion which al-Ḥākīm min Dūn Allāh adopted."<sup>53</sup> Al-Ḥākīm min Dūn Allāh, The Ruler without God, is, of course, Nasser. But this contemporary—and anachronistic—regnal title is pregnant with signification and crystallizes in its essence much of the textual richness of *The Story of My Days*. Al-Ḥākīm min Dūn Allāh is an onomastic but reverse parallel to al-Ḥākīm bi-Amr Allāh, The Ruler by Order of God. This latter was the regnal title of the sixth Fāṭimid caliph, a despotic and bloodthirsty ruler, who governed from 386/996–411/1021. Al-Ḥākīm has gone down in history (and especially in the history of Egypt) as particularly cruel, and eccentric to the point of madness.<sup>54</sup> To endow Nasser with a regnal appellation drawn from his Fāṭimid ancestor turns him into a cruel and near-insane tyrant. But this is perhaps the simplest sort of substitution.

More is at stake in 'Abd al-Ḥamīd's onomastic game. The classical Arabic onomastic system was a complex semiotic one and names, by their nature, pointed to an inherent dualism: referring at once to a person and a concept.<sup>55</sup> We have moved in this case from a

<sup>51</sup> Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī*, 11–12.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Kepel, *Le Prophète* 179–180; Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 130–143; Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s)*, especially 20–67.

<sup>53</sup> Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī*, 85.

<sup>54</sup> M. Canard, "Al-Ḥākīm bi-Amr Allāh," *EI*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> For an introduction to the complex Arabo-Islamic onomastic system, see, for example, Annemarie Schimmel, *Islamic Names* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989). For the semiotic complexities of this system, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas,

regnal title to a quality inherent in the individual's rule. By turning "bi-Amr Allāh" (by Order of God) into "min Dūn Allāh" (without God) this politically savvy narrator has also undermined the claim of legitimacy inherent in the original title. He has effectively detached the ruler from the Deity, the source of ultimate legitimacy, and cast aspersions on the religious legitimization of political authority. This question of the legitimacy of nominally Muslim rulers is a key issue between the official religious spokesmen of the regime and their Muslim activist opponents. This onomastic turn-of-phrase creates a link between the past and the present, helping to maintain that synchrony so characteristic of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd's narrative, a textual strategy that comments at once on the past and the present. This onomastic interplay is highly unusual given the deep-seated changes that have occurred in the onomastic system between the pre-modern and modern periods of Islamic history.

These name games are by no means innocent and demonstrate the fact that 'Abd al-Ḥamīd is involved in the universe of real politics and not simply textual politics. This does not keep the narrator from playing with the political. In fact, what perhaps distinguishes the preacher's saga is the exploitation of humor to denude the political of its importance. A police search of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd's house, undertaken five months after his marriage, uncovered kitchen knives. He was asked what these arms were. The hero thought to himself: would you call this the air force? the artillery? the armored cruisers? the rockets? So at last he said: "Yes, they are the arms of the onion!"<sup>56</sup>

The humor here is quite complex and partakes of several dimensions, not the least of which is bisociation, the bringing together of two elements or universes not normally associated with one another.<sup>57</sup> In this case, the bisociation is that between the domestic and the military. But the narrator draws out this bisociation by initially hesitating and listing all the possible weapons that come to mind. He appears at first to be taking quite seriously the question of what

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"Sign Conceptions in the Islamic World," in *Semiotics: A Handbook on the Sign-Theoretic Foundations of Nature and Culture*, eds. Roland Posner, Klaus Robering, and Thomas E. Sebeok (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), vol. 2, 1799–1814.

<sup>56</sup> Kishk, *Qiṣṣat Ayyāmī*, 106.

<sup>57</sup> For this notion of bisociation, see Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1975), 33–34. For a general discussion of humor and an integrated humor-model, see Malti-Douglas, *Structures of Avarice*, 109–117.

these weapons might be. But, in fact, he ends up effectively mocking the entire security apparatus whose question is turned upside down and associated with a household area, a kitchen, which normally has nothing to do with the political or the military. To add to the impropriety of the entire exercise, the narrator had made a point of telling his reader as soon as the knives were found that they had been part of the goods acquired on the occasion of his wedding. This adds an element of intimacy to the encounter, rendering the search all that much more invasive.

The involvement of the narrator with real politics goes beyond the household: he is imprisoned. The autobiography details this phase of its hero's life, partaking in the process of the genre of prison memoirs, indulged in by many an intellectual and political figure. From that perspective, the Kishkian narrative can also be fruitfully compared not only with the texts of other religious individuals imprisoned for their activities but with that group of texts written by non-religious figures.<sup>58</sup> The topoi are numerous: the initial arrest, the prison conditions, the tortures.<sup>59</sup>

The prison experience becomes the occasion for great verbal artistry on the narrator's part. When using the standard word for prison ward (*'anbar*), he posits that it is a *ḍidd* (pl. *addād*),<sup>60</sup> hence belonging to that classical Arabic lexicographical category of nouns that mean at once a thing and its opposite. This constitutes a grammatical sleight of hand, since the other meaning for *'anbar*, ambergris, is derived from a parallel but not identical word and the term is not to be found in the lists of *addād* provided by the medieval lexicographers.<sup>61</sup>

In another episode, 'Abd al-Ḥamīd notes that Ramaḍān in jail brings a breaking of the fast with "beans with worms (*fūl musawwis*), I ask God's forgiveness, rather worms with beans (*sūs mufawwil*)"

<sup>58</sup> Emanuel Sivan lists a great number of these texts in his *Radical Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 193, 196.

<sup>59</sup> For an analysis of some of these prison texts, see Barbara Harlow, *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), and especially 101–138; Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s)*, 159–176, where analysis and additional references can be found.

<sup>60</sup> Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī*, 115.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, al-Anbārī, *Kitāb al-Addād*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-ʿAṣriyya, 1987). See, also, *Thalāthat Nuṣuṣ fī al-Addād—Bāb al-Addād/Abū ʿUbayd, Kitāb al-Addād/al-Tawāzī, Risālat al-Addād/al-Munshī*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥusayn ʿĀl Yāsīn (Baghdad?: ʿĀlam al-Kutub, n.d.).

(with an “i” in the Arabic text for both qualifiers).<sup>62</sup> In this pithy play on words, our savvy narrator demonstrates his skills with the Arabic language. He starts with a play on the name of one of Egypt’s best-known dishes, *fūl mudammas*, a bean-dish, by retaining the first element, the word *fūl*. But instead of the *mudammas*, a reference to the way in which the beans are cooked, we get *musawwis*, a reference to the fact that the beans are laden with worms. *Fūl musawwis*, in fact, exists in Egyptian parlance to mean a rotten *fūl mudammas*. So far so good: we are still in the world of a dish whose dominant element is beans. But before the reader has digested (if the word be forgiven here!) this information, the narrator effects a stunning reversal, changing his mind and transforming the dish into *sūs mufawwil*, worms with beans. With this reformulation, the beans have been made gastronomically subservient to the worms and the dish has been transformed into something in which worms dominate. Not only that, but this literary tour de force is a linguist’s dream: ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd has created a neologism with *mufawwil*, a participle of an imaginary trilateral verb, *f-w-l*, with no existence in the Arabic language.<sup>63</sup>

As the reader follows the narrator on this concise but extremely potent alimentary journey, he or she is forced to move between the two textual gastronomical creations, both of which play on the original Egyptian dish and in each of which worms have an important role. The entire absurdity of this exercise is heightened by the allusion to the Deity, as the narrator seeks His forgiveness for having falsely identified the dish as one with a preponderance of beans. The bisociation between unsavory prison food and God is heightened when we discover that this odious cuisine was Ramaḍān fare.

But politics and religion are not the only elements linking life in the prison and life outside the prison. Dreams are a powerful domain exploited by the narrator, a domain that brings together the political, the onomastic, and the personal in the autobiography. The oniric, also, in its own way signals much more effectively the traditional in a modern text. The oniric narrative in a modern textual setting—and not necessarily a religious one—has an interesting and provocative relationship to tradition: it can reflect it, it can represent a

<sup>62</sup> Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī*, 125.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, E.W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge, England: The Islamic Texts Society, 1984), vol. 2, 2463.

dialogue with it, it can even attempt to negate it.<sup>64</sup> With these intricate relationships, dreams become active participants in that synchrony with which we have already become familiar.

The oniric and onirocritical traditions in Islam are rich and deep. Dreams formed part of a complex mantic system and their interpretation was semiotically governed. Of the various forms of divination of non-Islamic origin, oniromancy was the only one fully accepted by Orthodoxy. A cursory glance at the *ḥadīth* material is sufficient to demonstrate the level of integration.<sup>65</sup> There was also in the Islamic Middle Ages an important Greco-Islamic onirocritical tradition that blended the Greek science with its Islamic counterpart, much as was done with Greco-Islamic medicine.<sup>66</sup> This onirocritical tradition has continued with some significant adaptations down to the present day as a vigorous form of popular culture.<sup>67</sup>

It is not simply that this dream tradition is alive and well. It is that 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, the narrator of *The Story of My Days*, is quite conscious of this fact. He informs his reader of the importance of dreams and their place in "the sciences of Islam," even going so far as to mention the great author Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110/728), famous for his compendium on dreams.<sup>68</sup>

Some of the standard dream types one encounters in the centuries-long Arabo-Islamic tradition appear in this twentieth-century autobiography. One of the most interesting dream types was the cure

<sup>64</sup> On the oniric as a sign of the traditional, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "al-ʿAnāšir al-Turāthiyya fī al-ʿAdab al-ʿArabī al-Muʿāšir: al-Aḥlām fī Thalāth Qīṣaṣ," trans. ʿI. al-Sharqāwī, *Fuṣūl*, II, 2 (1982): 21–29. On the dream as a dialogue between the traditional and the modern, see Malti-Douglas, "Maḥfūz's Dreams."

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, al-Kirmānī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī bi-Sharḥ al-Kirmānī* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1981), vol. 24, 94–143.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Toufic Fahd, *La divination arabe* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966), 329–363; Artémidore d'Ephèse, *Le livre des songes*, traduit du grec en arabe par Ḥunayn b. Ishāq, ed. Toufic Fahd (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1964); al-Nābulusī, *Taʿīr al-Anām fī Taʿbīr al-Manām* (Cairo: ʿIsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, n.d.); Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab al-Kalām fī Tafṣīr al-Aḥlām*, printed on the margins of al-Nābulusī, *Taʿīr al-Anām fī Taʿbīr al-Manām* (Cairo: ʿIsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, n.d.); Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Morality in the Guise of Dreams, A Critical Edition of Kitāb al-Manām*, with Introduction by Leah Kinberg (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994). For an inventory of Islamic onirocritical literature, see Fahd, *La divination arabe*, 329–363.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Aḥmad al-Ṣabbāḥī ʿAwaḍ Allāh, *Tafṣīr al-Aḥlām* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbūlī, 1977?); Ibrāhīm Muḥammad al-Jamal, *Iktartu lak min al-Turāth: Tafṣīr al-Aḥlām li l-Imāmayn al-Jatīlayn Ibn Sīrīn wa l-Nābulusī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qurʾān, 1982).

<sup>68</sup> Kishk, *Qīṣṣat Ayyāmī*, 54, 118ff.; Ibn Sīrīn, *Muntakhab al-Kalām*.

dream in which a holy personage would appear to a sick or handicapped dreamer and effect a cure during the oniric state.<sup>69</sup> ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd narrates a story heard from a certain *shaykh*’s son, a narrative that could have been transposed from a medieval biography. This *shaykh* took care not only of the spiritual affairs of his mosque but of the mundane ones as well, such as cleaning the privies. One day he fell from a ladder and broke his right arm, which was then put in a cast. The *shaykh* was not very pleased with this situation because he could not undertake the cleaning of the mosque. In a dream, he saw the Prophet who squeezed his arm, so that upon awakening he was cured. In the course of the narrative, the familiar *ḥadīth* is quoted with the Prophet saying: “He who sees me in a dream truly sees me. For the devil does not impersonate me.”<sup>70</sup>

This is a dream that clearly needs no interpretation, though the narrator inserts the popular *ḥadīth* directly into the dream account itself, as soon as the Prophet makes his nightly appearance. This insertion of the Prophetic tradition directly into the oniric experience rather than following it has the added advantage of testifying to the veracity of the dream even before the oniric state is completed. In the Islamic onirocritical system, with which, as we saw, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd is very familiar, the appearance of the Prophet is a guarantor of the veracity of the dream as is the fact that the dream may not need an interpretation.<sup>71</sup>

This oniric experience is open to various levels of interpretation. On one level, the cure dream restores the use of the arm to the *shaykh*, permitting him to continue his task of cleaning the mosque. On another level, the Prophet, by effecting the cure, assures that a life on the religious path is not interrupted. The case is not too dissimilar from that of the medieval figure of Ya‘qūb ibn Sufyān whose dream experience is significant for us in more than one way.

Ya‘qūb had been copying late one night and continued copying until the night came to its end. He suddenly became blind and could

<sup>69</sup> See Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Dreams, the Blind, and the Semiotics of the Biographical Notice,” *Studia Islamica*, LI (1980), 137–162.

<sup>70</sup> Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī*, 20–21. For this popular *ḥadīth*, see, for example, al-Dārimī, *Sunan al-Dārimī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.), vol. 2, 125–126; Ibn Māja, *Sunan Ibn Māja*, ed. Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Ilmiyya, n.d.), vol. 2, 1384–1385; al-Kirmānī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 24, 106ff.

<sup>71</sup> Toufic Fahd, “Les Songes et leur Interprétation selon l’Islam,” in *Les Songes et leur Interprétation*, Sources Orientales II (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1959), 140–142.

not see the light and began to cry more and more heavily because of this. In the process, he fell asleep and saw the Prophet Muḥammad in a dream. The Prophet asked him why he was crying to which he replied: "O Messenger of God, my vision has gone and I am grieved by what has escaped me concerning the writing of your *sunna*, and by being cut off from my country." The Prophet then told him to approach him and passed his hand over Ya'qūb's eyes as if he were reciting over them.<sup>72</sup> Ya'qūb awoke, his vision restored, and returned to his copying.<sup>73</sup> The medieval Ya'qūb may be chronologically distant from the contemporary *shaykh*, but their oniric experiences shorten this distance. Their corporality had initially threatened to destroy their abilities to perform their duties in the religious sphere, but the curative dream eliminates that problem altogether.

The cure dream with Ya'qūb ibn Sufyān appears in the biographical dictionary of the blind, the *Nakt al-Himyān fī Nukat al-'Umyān*, by the Mamlūk polymath, Khalīl ibn Aybak al-Ṣafadī (d. 764/1363). But, interestingly enough, the cure dream in the contemporary text is the privilege of someone with a broken arm and not someone like the hero, 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, who is already visually handicapped by the time the cure dream is narrated in his text. His blindness, unlike that of Ya'qūb ibn Sufyān, is permanent and not subject to a dream cure.

The dream involving the *shaykh* with the broken arm is narrated by 'Abd al-Ḥamīd. He is a mere transmitter of this oniric experience, with no direct involvement in the dream activity. In other situations, however, the hero of the autobiographical text is both dreamer and dream interpreter. The young 'Abd al-Ḥamīd's school days are imbued with pre-examination dreams, which all seem to guarantee the dreamer's success.<sup>74</sup>

It is first and foremost in the prison that the oniric and the onirocritical come together. During his first days of incarceration, the narrator wonders about his presence in the prison. What is his crime, he muses? When will he leave? He then sees in a dream Abū Bakr

<sup>72</sup> This would appear to be a reference to a curative practice which involves reciting the Qur'ān over an individual and which, according to my colleague, Prof. A.A. Sachedina, is still practiced in the Middle East today.

<sup>73</sup> Al-Ṣafadī, *Nakt al-Himyān*, 312. For a discussion of this dream, see Malti-Douglas, "Dreams, the Blind."

<sup>74</sup> Kishk, *Qissat Ayyāmī*, 53-54, 55, 561.

standing in front of the pulpit of the Prophet.<sup>75</sup> The dreamer addresses the caliph (*yā khalīfat rasūl allāh*) asking him if he is pleased with the current state of affairs. Abū Bakr replies with the last two verses from Sūrat al-Ṭūr, enjoining the dreamer to be patient and to praise the Lord.<sup>76</sup> The oniric medium provides the first caliph with the opportunity to step in and comment directly on the present state of affairs, through the use of verses from the Muslim Holy Book. The Qurʾān is the textual authority that ties the twentieth-century prisoner to the seventh-century leader of the Muslim community. The medieval ruler's corporal placement in front of a pulpit is not accidental: this is the physical symbol of a preacher's craft and our twentieth-century hero is first and foremost a preacher.

As ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd elaborates the significance of the oniric, he is careful to note the fact that dreams were related to Joseph in prison, dreams which he explained.<sup>77</sup> The much-beloved Joseph story is, in fact, a momentous referent in Shaykh Kishk's autobiography (as it is in other contemporary Islamist life stories, such as that of Shaykh Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Shaʿrāwī).<sup>78</sup> The saga of the Biblical Joseph with his extensive adventures is related in the Qurʾānic Surā 12, Sūrat Yūsuf, and is undeniably one of the most memorable chapters in the Muslim Holy Book. More often, it is Joseph's adventures with the Egyptian ruler's wife that are highlighted.<sup>79</sup>

Not so for our contemporary preacher-narrator. For him, the Joseph story is a multi-faceted narrative, serving multiple purposes. As ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd is explaining the travails of prison life, he notes that the prisoners decided that in order to make the best of their situation, they should deliver lectures in their areas of specialty: the physicians would speak about medicine, the littérateurs on literature, the engineers on engineering, and so on. Our narrator was asked to participate and he decided to do Qurʾānic exegesis (*tafsīr*). "So I chose from the *Qurʾān* what would be appropriate:" the Sūrat Yūsuf.<sup>80</sup>

And there is nothing more appropriate that ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd could

<sup>75</sup> Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī*, 106.

<sup>76</sup> Al-Qurʾān, Sūra 52/Sūrat al-Ṭūr, verses 48–49.

<sup>77</sup> Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī*, 54.

<sup>78</sup> See Shaykh Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Shaʿrāwī, *Mishwār Hayātī* (Cairo: al-Mukhtār al-Islāmī li l-Ṭibāʿa wa l-Nashr wa l-Tawzīʿ, 1988), 12ff.

<sup>79</sup> For a discussion, see Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, where the Joseph story surfaces and resurfaces in different guises from *The Thousand and One Nights* to Fadwā Ṭūqān.

<sup>80</sup> Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī*, 118.

have chosen. The saga of Joseph brings together the onirocritical and the incarceratory. Sure, the narrator alights at certain elements of the story, such as Joseph's shirt.<sup>81</sup> But, in fact, it is the nexus of the dream and the prison that is powerful in the physical and intellectual environment in which the contemporary preacher is circulating. As 'Abd al-Ḥamīd is explicating his handling of the Qur'ānic *sūra*, he adds: "then I talked about the role of dreams in the life of a prisoner and truly there was no means of communication for us with the outside world other than the true dreams."<sup>82</sup> With these words, the prison oniric experience has become that much more significant. Not only is it functioning, as it normally does in the Arabo-Islamic universe, as a sign to the dreamer, but here it has become a mode of communication with the world outside the prison walls.

Joseph becomes the role model for the contemporary preacher. Just like the imprisoned Biblical Prophet, the imprisoned Muslim preacher has a direct involvement with the oniric world of his co-prisoners. "I used, inside the prison, to pass long hours every day listening to the dreams of the brothers and undertaking their interpretations."<sup>83</sup>

The narrator still remembers, he tells his readers, "that strange phenomenon in dreams. For often I used to see my father, God have mercy on his soul, in a dream, sitting with me and not leaving me until I got up to prepare for the dawn prayer." The state of the prisoners was painful for the dead, the narrator adds, so they came to stand beside the prisoners in dreams.<sup>84</sup> The timing of the oniric experience could not be more appropriate: the veracity of dreams seen at dawn is corroborated in the dream books.<sup>85</sup> In this particular instance, the presence of the father is a sign of paternal support, decrying the current political situation.

While still in prison, the birth of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd's son is "announced" to him in a dream. The dreamer sees his older brother carrying a young child and when he asks him from behind the bars who that is, his brother replies: "It is your son, Sanad."<sup>86</sup> This oniric experi-

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Fahd, "Les Songes et leur Interprétation selon l'Islam," 141.

<sup>86</sup> Kishk, *Qissat Ayyāmī*, 121-122.

ence provides the narrator with the opportunity to make asides about names and their importance as signs, not only in dreams but in general. Prophetic *ḥadīths* buttress the arguments here. The name of the son, meaning support, provides the dreamer with hope, as he interprets it as support from the Deity.

The words of the Prophet that inhabit this twentieth-century autobiography and relate directly to the life of its hero are an intertextual comment on the essential telescoping of chronological time. Just as the Prophet could interpret names as signs of good augury, so it is with ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd. Equipped with this onomastic interpretive system, the reader is, willy nilly, invited to revisit the entire episode with Nasser and his “regnal” title, discussed above. His appellation as the “Ruler without God” is all the much more powerful.

In this way, the narrator, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd, is clearly attacking the modern secular state, its agents, and its accouterments. All this con-cords with the preacher’s political position clearly and frequently formulated in the autobiography. The modern state is not simply impious, it usurps power and roles that more properly belong to what political scientists refer to as civil society. In Shaykh Kishk’s terms, the state as social institution should be replaced by the mosque (of which he of course is a leader).<sup>87</sup>

*Qisṣat Ayyāmī* is more than a simple denunciation of modern civilization and the state, however. Its synchronic use of *turāth*, its virtual denial of anachrony, tend to suggest that nothing is new under the sun. The problems, even the crimes of today, are mere replays of those of the past. Nasser is al-Ḥākīm, his “heresy” is socialism. It is probably this more than anything else which distinguishes Shaykh Kishk’s use of the *turāth* from that of his postmodern, more secularly-minded compatriots. Both the religious writer and the less religious ones, however, are operating within a strong referential system that assumes considerable knowledge on the part of their contemporary readers. For the more secularly-minded authors, classical citations and references are part of a deliberate literary chaos. For the Egyptian preacher, they are part of a new literary discourse, one which is modern in spirit, yet largely unmediated through European literary forms, and which suggests the still living power of traditional words, ideas, and institutions.

<sup>87</sup> See, for example, Kishk, *Qisṣat Ayyāmī*, 30.

## IMAN MERSAL: EGYPT'S POSTMODERN POET

KAMAL ABDEL-MALEK

Iman Mersal was born in November 1966 in a small village near the city of Mansoura in northern Egypt. She completed her schooling in Mansoura and moved to Cairo to study Arabic literature at the University of Cairo where she obtained an M.A. with distinction in 1998. She is the author of three collections of poetry, *Ittiṣāfāt*, *Mamarr Mu'tim Yaṣluḥ li-Ta'allum al-Raqṣ*, *Al-Mashy Aṭwal Waqt Mumkin* and has worked as a writer and editor of a number of literary and feminist magazines in Egypt. In the fall of 1998, she moved with her American husband from Cairo to Canada where she still lives. Iman Mersal is considered as one of the most prominent Egyptian poets of the "1990s" generation. Her poetry in the main depicts the "postmodern condition" of the Egyptian scene in the last decade. Such condition is characterized by the breakdown of totalizing ideologies and grand issues. There is no celebration of nationalist causes or exhortation to do battle with external or internal enemies; there is no depiction of nature, or agony over being separated from one's beloved. This is a poetry that wades through the broken bits of identity, the heavy sense of total isolation from others, and the unbearable solitude that saps the vitality of one's soul. The example below is derived from her collection, *Al-Mashy Aṭwal Waqt Mumkin*.

### CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

Iman Mersal

Yes,  
The bow tie of the Maestro,  
An arrow that pointed to two opposite directions,  
Was jaded.  
We did not see the fingers of the musicians  
But we followed them leave one after another

We know that the poets who came to the concert earlier  
 Were biased in favor of the reed pipe  
 Even though its rueful tune was totalizing  
 We know that they smoked a lot in between segments  
 But we did not care  
 We cared only to see the black curtain at the back of the stage  
 We were late  
 And almost missed glancing at the academicians retrieving their  
 coats.

No,  
 The atmosphere was confining  
 As though you were in military barracks  
 Having no choice but chant the national anthem  
 But—as you may know—as in foreign movies,  
 It usually rains at this point.

We did not regret that the concert was over.  
 Instead of extending the rope of dramatic spectacle  
 To the other bank of the river  
 We crossed the bridge  
 Greeted the foolscap seller  
 Who had just returned from the festival of the saintly al-Husayn.

Yes,  
 I was separated from them in the midst of a camel caravan  
 That was coming out of the Arab League Street  
 And when we reunited, we gave some of our cigarettes  
 To a soldier guarding a building he could not name  
 Finally we reached an uptown bar  
 Full of humanitarian amplitude and a few scattered scratches.

We were obliged to stay there for four years.  
 We read the books of Samir Amin,  
 Tried to Egyptianize the work of Henry Miller  
 As for Kondera, well, he changed our justifications for treason.

There we received a letter from a friend who lived in Paris  
 He said that he realized that inside him was another person  
 Totally unfamiliar to him

Every day, he said, he hauled his misery behind him  
 On sidewalks much smoother than their Third World counterparts  
 And he was breaking down in a better fashion than before  
 So we grudged his good fortune  
 And we wished we would one day be banished to another metropolis.

We were not concerned when we ran out of money  
 One of us had become a Sufi saint  
 And after his brief prayer  
 A beer well—honest to God—gushed forth  
 So we feigned unconsciousness and created a lexicon—all our own:  
 riwish; hanini; ‘awwa’; danashin, etc.

We screamed screechingly  
 No one understood us  
 And when the oldest among us suggested that we be positive  
 I was thinking of a way to convert public baths into weeping spaces  
 And the spacious city squares into urinals  
 At that moment  
 A senior intellectual yelled at his friend:  
 “When I am talking about democracy, listen and shut the hell up.”

We ran for an hour  
 Then rested at the Mu‘izz Street  
 Where we met a disturbed martyr  
 We reassured him that he was alive  
 And could seek his livelihood if he wished  
 And that, to start with, there was no war for him to die in it.

Yes,  
 We could have cemented our association with metaphysics  
 Had it not been for one of us  
 Who was covering his skull with a fancy hat  
 For that reason we must have looked to them like foreign tourists  
 Which prompted the spice seller to run after us  
 Shouting: “For the sake of our Prophet Muḥammad, stop!  
 For the sake of our Prophet Muḥammad, wait!”

There was no other place for us to go  
 Except the Imam cemetery

Where we sat for another year  
Smelling the scent of the guava trees  
And when I finally decided to leave all of them,  
And forge ahead, alone  
I was already thirty years old.

—translated from the Arabic by Kamal Abdel-Malek

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