The “Other” Middle East; An Anthology of Levantine Literature, in Search of Identity

Translations Sampling
Ronny Someck
Jasmine, Song on Sandpaper

Jasmine, Song on Sandpaper

Feirouz\(^1\) lifts her lips up
To rain down jasmine
Upon those who had once crossed paths
Without realizing they had fallen in love.
I am listening to her in Muhammad’s Fiat,
At noon, on Ibn Gabirol Street.
A Lebanese diva, singing in an Italian car
Owned by an Arab poet hailing from Beqaa al-Gharbiyye\(^2\)

On a street named after a Hebrew poet who’d lived in Spain.

And the jasmine?
If it falls down from the Heavens at the End of Days

It will become for just a second
A Green light,
Until the next light changes
At the next intersection.

\(^1\) Feirouz is Lebanon’s favorite diva, famous for her Lebanese patriotic odes (sung mainly in dialectal Lebanese). She is, however, quite popular throughout the Arab world, even among those unfamiliar with Lebanese.\(^2\) Beqaa al-Gharbiyye is an Arab majority town in Haifa (Northern Israel). It should be mentioned that Haifa and the Galilee in general had been historically linked to the southern confines of Southern Lebanon, and indeed, for a time, were all part of the Ottoman Vilayet (State) of Beirut. There are many shared cultural, linguistic, and ethnic attributes between Lebanese (from Mount-Lebanon) and Galileans (just as there are shared values and history among all Levantines.) This poem, with its apparent innocence, and the almost banal nature of its themes, speaks with exquisite simplicity to the hybridity and the meshing of identities, traditions, languages, and histories in that part of the Eastern Mediterranean (Tel Aviv) that is the locus of this poem. Here, Arabs, Lebanese, Hebrews, Jews, Muslims, Palestinians, Christians, Italians, Spaniards, and many more identities are given center stage in barely fifty words of Hebrew, and in the space of the mere seconds that it takes a red traffic light to turn green. As mentioned in the introduction to Somekh, the corpus of this young poet’s work seeks to reclaim the Eastern Mediterranean (Israel and its Levantine bailiwick as a whole) to a more spacious, elastic, fluid, and inclusive notion of identity. In this, he is closer to Maalouf’s cosmopolitan polyglot *Leo Africanus* than he is to the lachrymose and jaundiced patriotisms of his times’ Arabs and Jews.
My Friends,
I bring you news of the death of our old language
And our old books,
I bring you news of the death of our hollow vocabulary,
And our abusive word-lists of debauchery, defamation, and insult.
I bring you news of the death of the ideas that have led us on the road to defeat.
[…]
We mustn’t be surprised by our failures on the battlefield,
For, we wage our wars armed with the Oriental’s knack for oration and verbiage,
Empty bravado, rhetorical arm-flexing, and senseless boasting…
[…]
It pains me to listen to your News in the morning.
It pains me to listen to your bombast and barking.
[… ] Five thousand years, and we’re still languishing in the dungeon,
With overgrown beards, a curious and unknown currency,
And vacant eyes that have become harbors for maggots and flies…
[…]
My friends,
Why don’t you try to cleanse your thoughts and wash your clothes?
My friends, why don’t you try to read a book?
Better yet, for once, why not try writing a book?
Try sailing to the lands of snows and fog…
People beyond your dungeon don’t know who you are…
People must think you’re some curious breed of beast…
[…]
Our souls are bankrupt.
Our days are spent idly, beholden to rituals and witchcraft,
Playing chess, or slumbering…
Memorizing and regurgitating empty verses, mindlessly.
[…]
We praise like frogs, we curse like frogs.
We make our thugs into heroes,
And we dismiss our righteous as crooks and villains…
We mill around in mosques,
Torpid, shiftless, indolent…
We write pointless poetry,
We contrive corny proverbs…
And we beg Allah to hand us victory and withhold it from our enemy […]
Because half of our people have no tongue.
What value has a people bereft of its tongue?

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3 This poem is a double-edged sword indicting not only the Arabs’ lack of initiative, but also lamenting their loss of language and, indeed, the banality of the Arabic language. This certainly speaks of Qabbani’s
When Will Someone Finally Announce the Death of the Arabs
منى يعلنون وفاة العرب

I’ve been trying, since my very early beginnings, to sketch out a land that I could figuratively call “the Arab World.”
A homeland that would forgive me
Were I to shatter its moon,
And would be grateful to me for writing poetry of love,
Freely, like free birds, up on trees …

I’ve been trying to sketch out a land
That would allow me to always be
Worthy of love and passion,
A homeland that would let me spread out
My love-cloak before you in the summertime,
And dry out your dress after the rains.

I’ve been trying to sketch out a land
With a parliament redolent with jasmine,
And a tender cultured people redolent with jasmine,
A land where doves could slumber over my head in peace,
A land whose minarets could cry-out in my eyes, for peace..

I’ve been trying to sketch out a land,
That could be my poetry’s muse,
A land that would not breathe down my neck,
Whose soldiers won’t trample my head…
I’ve been trying to sketch out a land,
That would reward my poetry,
And would absolve me and accept my folly…

I’ve been trying to sketch out a capital for love…
Free of phobias and inhibitions,

despair at the Arabs after the 1967 defeat. But it also indict the lack of initiative, the indolence, the stagnation, and the cultural backwardness that many of Qabbani’s contemporaries castigated.

The moon is a very powerful symbol of Islam and Muslim piety. This is so perhaps primarily because Muslims follow a lunar calendar, and their orthopractic traditions and holidays are completely reliant on lunar cycles. Shattering the moon in the context of Arab or Muslim culture can certainly be taken as an affront to religious traditions and religion itself, and this was certainly Qabbani’s intent.
A city that wouldn’t slay women and womanhood… فلا يبدون الأئوئثة فيها...
A city that wouldn’t repress and subdue their body… ولا يقمعون الجسد...

So, I moved southward..
And I moved northward…
But I did so for naught…
For the coffee of all of the Arabs’ coffee-shops
Had the same distinctive bland taste...
And all their females, lest they shed their cloaks
Had the same distinctive smell
And all of my homeland’s tribesmen turned out to be the same;
Men who barely chewed their food,
Males who devoured females
The second they laid eyes on them...

I’ve been trying, since my very early beginnings,
To be different from you all,
To shun your stilted pre-packaged language,
To shun the worship of your idols...

I’ve been trying to set fire to your Texts,
To set ablaze this language that I was made to don,
For, some of our poetry is a graveyard,
And some of our language a funerary shroud.

And so, I set out to date this land’s last remaining female,
But alas, I went to our meeting-place,
Long after she’d already been gone.

I’ve been trying to set myself free from your stifling semantics,
From the curse of your “Subject and Predicate”⁵...
I’ve been trying scrub the dust of your dead language off of my skin,
Cleanse my face with rain-water...

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⁵ “Subject and Predicate” refers to one of the foundational grammatical structures in “classical” Arabic syntax. As mentioned in the introduction to Qabbani, his poetry sought to avoid the semantic “escapisms” of his contemporaries—the infatuation with language at the expense of content. Where poets of his generation tended toward literary euphemisms and opaque circumlocutions, Qabbani’s work flowed with devastating clarity; a fluid, simple, pellucid language bordering almost on the dialectal, free from grammatical exigencies. His quip against the “Subject and Predicate” in this segment was an assault on Arabic grammar itself, the obsession of all Arabic writers of note, and a tradition that he sought to undermine and dismantle.
And free myself from the tyranny of your sands…

So long Qureish⁶,
So long Kulayb⁷,
So long Mudar⁸…

I’ve been trying to sketch out a land
I could figuratively call the “Arab world.”
A place where I could have a permanent pillow under my head;
A permanent bed;
A place where I could hang my hat,
And learn the difference between peregrination
And homeland…
But alas, they took away my paint-brush,
And they prevented me from drawing
The features of this fatherland…

I’ve been trying, since my very early childhood,
To spawn a space filled with jasmine.
So I set up a “lovers’ sanctuary,”
The first of its kind in the history of the Arabs,
A place that would be welcoming of lovers.
And I erased all the ancient wars
Between men and women,
Between doves,
And those who slay the doves,
And between the marble
And those who lacerate the whiteness of marble…
But, alas, they shuttered my “lovers’ sanctuary,”
They told me that passion
Is unbecoming of the Arabs and their History,
Unbecoming of the Arabs and their chastity,

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⁶ *Qureish* (Ar. قريش) is one of the major Arabian tribes of the Prophet Muhammad’s era; an illustrious dynasty to which the Prophet himself belonged before receiving his revelations and beginning his ministry. Ironically, it was this same tribe that was the Prophet’s chief opponent for most of his life—although it did also produce some of his staunchest allies.

⁷ *Kulayb*, a diminutive of *Kalb* (Ar. Dog), is a notable pre-Islamic Arabian tribe, famous for its poets.

⁸ *Mudar* is also another illustrious pre-Islamic tribe of noble Arabian lineage. Bidding farewell to these famous tribes was Qabbani’s way of dissociating himself from their modern descendants, the leaders and avatars of today’s Arab world, and what he referred to as their dilapidated culture, archaic language, and outmoded value systems.
Unbecoming of the Arabs and their patrimony\(^9\),

Amazing, those Arabs!!

I’ve been trying to imagine,
The exact shape of my homeland’s features?
I’ve been trying to reclaim my space
In my mother’s womb,
Trying to swim against the Time’s tides…
Trying to furtively steal some figs,
And peaches,
And almonds off of trees,
And take flight, like a free bird,
Chasing ships over the waves.
I’ve been trying to imagine
The Garden of Eden,
And how I would spend eternity there,
In the Garden of Eden,
Frolicking in rivers of ruby,
And rivers of milk…

But then when I awoke
I discovered the silliness of my dream…
For, there’s no moon in the sky of Ariha\(^10\)
And there are no fish in the waters of Furat\(^11\)

And no coffee in Aden…

Through poetry, I’ve been trying to

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\(^9\) This segment refers to Qabbani’s feminist engagements and his role as a pungent critic of Arab misogyny and the Arabs’ hyper-virile mentality. As mentioned earlier, although his post-1967 work would turn into an “anti-Arab” (or anti-Arab nationalist) vitriol indicting the causes of the Arabs’ defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Qabbani remained true to his feminist beginnings, and maintained his unrelenting assaults on patriarchy, even when his main themes did not lend themselves to feminist topics.

\(^10\) Ariha is the name of a town in central (present-day) Syria, north of the city of Idlib. It’s the administrative center of the Province of Idlib, and is believed to have been founded in the 3rd Millennium BC, at the site of the ancient city of Ebla. It is the site of many ancient “tels” (archaeological mounds) and more recent historical monuments dating back to Roman, Mamluk and Ottoman eras. The town is one of the major commercial and agricultural center in the vicinity of the northern city of Aleppo, and is famous for its olives and olive byproducts (soaps, olive oil, etc...)

\(^11\) “Furat” is the Arabic name of the River Euphrates. Qabbani is clearly lamenting the etiolation of culture and the Arabs’ disorientation by mentioning these two centers of ancient civilization and their apparent desolation under the rule of Arabs and Arab nationalists.
Grapple with the impossible...
I’ve been trying to plant date-palms,
But people in my land,
Uproot the date-palms...
I’ve been trying to make our horses’ neighs
Resound more loudly,
But our city dwellers
Abhor horses and their neighs...

I’ve been trying to love you, my beloved...
To love you, clear of all rituals,
Past all Texts...
And outside all Shari’as and systems of laws,
I’ve been trying to love you, my beloved...
Even in my exile, I’ve been trying to love you,
So that, as I press your body against mine,
I may feel like being in the embrace of my native soil.

I’ve been trying, ever since my early childhood
To read anything that would tell the stories
Of Arab Prophets...
Arab Sages...
And Arab Poets...
But I found no poetry,
Save for that of the Caliph’s bootlicks,
Obsequious men, demeaning themselves
For a pathetic handful of rice...
For a miserly handful of pennies¹²..

Amazing, those Arabs!!

And I saw nothing but tribes
That could barely tell the difference
Between the tender flesh of women
And the flesh of fresh dates

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¹² Panegyric poetry is one of the chief and most admired genres of classical Arabic literature. Its aim was to extol the virtues of tribe elders, sheikhs, Caliphs, and other men of power and influence, often in overwrought hyperbolic language, often earning the poet enough riches to keep him in the service of the extolled master. Qabansi’s criticism here is directed at poets of his generation—as at those of past generations—who composed poetry for their own fame and fortune, and not for literary or social value.
And I saw no newspapers,  
Save for those who eagerly shed their undergarments  
Before the first President that is bestowed upon us,  
The first petty colonel that tramples us\textsuperscript{13},  
And the first usurer who comes to fleece us...  
Truly Amazing, those Arabs!!

I’ve been watching the sorry state of the Arabs  
For the past fifty years.. and for fifty years  
I have been listening to them thundering without raining,  
I’ve been watching them going into wars  
And never walking out of them,  
Chewing on the husks of “eloquence”  
Mindlessly,  
But saying nary a word of substance...

For the past fifty years  
I’ve been trying to sketch out a land  
I could figuratively call the “Arab world”…  
At times I’ve sketched it in the color of my veins,  
And at times in the color of anger…  
But when I was done sketching,  
I asked myself:  
Were someone, one day, to announce the death of the Arabs,  
In what cemetery would they be lain to rest?  
And who would want to be caught weeping at their graveside?  
For they have no begotten daughters,  
And they have no begotten sons,  
And they’ve begotten nothing of substance,  
Nor have they earned anything worthy of mourning...

I’ve been trying, since my early dabbling with poetry,  
To measure the distance between myself  
And my Arab ancestors.  
And I saw armies  
Unlike armies,  
And I saw conquests,

\textsuperscript{13} The reference here is clearly to Arab rulers spawned in the past fifty years by so-called “revolutions,” led in the main by a collection of colonels and petty officers, from Kadhafi to Nasser, and from Mubarak to Assad.
Unlike conquests…
And I watched all of our wars,
Very closely,
On our television screens…
And there were casualties
On our television screens,
And there were victories
Descending upon us from Allah,
All courtesy of our television screens…

O beloved homeland,
They have made you into a freak-show,
A soap-opera that glues us to our TV-screens at night.
But tell me, how are we to see the conclusion of this show
Were someone to shut off our power?

For the past fifty years,
I’ve been writing down my impressions…
And all I could see was a people persuaded
That the Secret Police
Was Allah’s will,
Decreed by Him,
Just like migraines,
Just like the Flu,
Just like Leprosy
And Scabies…

Fifty years have passed, and all I can see is Arabism,
On display, at an old furniture auction…
But, alas, there are no Arabs in sight…

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14 Again, this is another assault on what Qabbani deemed the Arabs “indolence and defeatism,” driven by superstition and predestination, “Allah’s will” as he called it—a common “amulet” and verbal talisman of sorts, recited by most Arabophones when faced with challenging circumstances. Instead of resigning themselves of “Allah’s will”, Qabbani’s work was an attempt at awakening dynamism and free-will among his Arab readers.
When the new moon rises in the Orient,
The white rooftops slumber
Beneath heaps of flowers…
And so, people leave their stores
And walk in processions
Toward their date with the moon...
They carry off their bread, their transistor-radios,
And their drug paraphernalia…
Then they set out to sell, and buy, fantasies
And imageries,
And they pass out and swoon
The minute they see the moon.

What does this orb of light
Do to my land?
To the land of the Prophets
And the dimwits,
The land of tobacco chewers
And drug pushers

What is it that the moon does to us,
To make shed our pride,
And make us live for the sole purpose
Of beseeching the heavens.
What have the heavens got for us,
A bunch of idle wimpy weaklings
Who pass out
The minute the moon rises,
Who solicit the graves of Saints
Imploring them
For rice and children…

Then they spread out their elegant soft rugs
And entertain themselves with an opium
Named “fate”
And “destiny”,
In my land...
The land of the dimwits.

What weakness and decay
Take hold of us
The minute the moonlight gushes out...
When rugs, and thousands of baskets
And tea cups.. and children..
March onto the hills,
In my land..
Where the gullible weep,
And live one more day under a light
They cannot see,
In my land...

Where people live bereft of eyes,
Where the gullible weep,
And pray,
And fornicate,
And live, dependent, submissive, subservient
Ever since they came into being, as a people,
They live dependent, submissive, subservient.

And they go on beseeching the crescent-moon:
“O crescent-moon...
O spring gushing with diamonds
And hashish and slumbers..
O hanging marble divinity,
O object of wonder,
May you remain ours, the pride of the Orient,
A cluster of diamonds,
For us millions of pinheads.

During those Oriental nights,
When the full-moon reaches its apex,
The whole Orient sheds its pride,
And gives up the fight...

وقضاء،
في بلادي...
في بلاد البسطاء.

أي ضعف وانحلال
يتوالنا
إذا الضوء تنفق ...
فألسجايج وألف السلاسل،
وقداح الشاي، والأطفال،
تحتل التلال،
في بلادي ...
حيث يكي الساذجون،
ويشعون على الضوء
الذي لا يصررون
في بلادي ...

حيث يحيا الناس من دون عيون
حيث يكي الساذجون
ويصرعون،
ويضرون
ويجرون اتكال منذ كنوا،
يعيشون اتكال.

وينادون الهلال:
"يا هلال...
أيها النبع الذي يمطر ماس،
وحتيشا، وتنعاس،
أيها الرب الرخامي المعلق،
أيها شيء الذي لا يصق
دمت للشرق، لنأ،
عند ماس
للملابس التي قد عطلت فيها الحواس،

في ليالي الشرق، لمنا
يبلغ البد البناء،
يتعزى الشرق من كل كرامه
ونبال..

And "destiny",
In my land...
The land of the dimwits.
For, those millions, running barefoot.  
Those millions, advocates of four-wife-marriages. 
And believers in the day of Judgment. 
Those millions who know not the bread crumb, 
Save in their fantasies, 
Those millions who, come night fall, 
Dwell in homes made of coughing. 
Those millions who know no remedy to their ills, 
And render themselves corpses.  
Under the moonlight. 

In my land..  
Where the gullible weep,  
and die weeping,  
Every time they see the face of the crescent-moon,  
And then they weep some more,  
Every time the sound of a contemptible lute moves them,  
And the strain and refrain of “ya leili ya leil,”  
That curse, which, we, in the Orient, 
Describe as “singing” and “ya leil,”  
In my land,  
In the land of the dimwits…

In this land, where we regurgitate..  
Long-drawn refrains and recitations,  
This plague that lacerates and disables the Orient,  
Those long-drawn refrains and recitations,  
This Orient that’s continuously regurgitating ..  
Regurgitating History..  
And idle dreams..  
And hollow fantasies..  
This Orient of ours, 
In constant search  
For heroics, 
In the empty bombasts  
And poetic arm-flexing  
Of (Abu-Zaid al-Hilaali)..
Charles Corm
La Montagne Inspirée/The Hallowed Mountain

If I dare remind my countrymen
Of our Phoenician forefathers,
It is because, back in their day,
Long before we had become
Mere Muslims and Christians,
We were a single nation
At the forefront of History,
United in the same glorious past.

Today, having grown
Into what we’ve become,
And by virtue of all our modern creeds
— which are all praiseworthy —
We owe it to ourselves
To love one another
The way we did when we were still
Splendid humanist pagans.

[...] No, no, my mother tongue,
You aren’t a fallen corpse
In the abyss of time!
I still can feel your verve,
Swelling up in my veins,
Rising like springtide,
Surging up like a wave!

And I still can hear
Your sparkling silver springs
Churning up from the past,
Whispering to my soul.
[...] And I still can feel your blazing breath
shimmering over these Eastern shores!

In all of natures shudders,
Which molded the spirit
Of my distant forefathers,
It’s still your warm voice,
And it’s still your whispers,
That move about the Eastern skies!

Your soft and graceful inflexions
Still slip their ancient drawl
In all the modern languages
Swarming on our shores;
Your sparse and scattered caresses,
Still flow in my veins
And cuddle with my soul!

And I still can feel your faithful fingers,
Gently knock on memory’s door,
Awakening my heart,
With flashbacks of ancient glories,
Filling my soul with joy!

For, even as I write
In someone else’s language,
And even when I speak
In someone else’s tongue,
It’s still you in my voice,
My sainted mother’s voice,
Snug like a lover’s warmth!

For, Man here below,
In spite of having learnt
His brute oppressor’s tongue,
Has kept the looks, the tone,
Has kept the pitch, the pulse,
Of his forefathers’ inflections,
Of his old ancestors’ voice!

Exiles and vagabonds,
Through all their ports of call,
Still bring along their language,
Still cling to their old brogue,
Still pilfer its perfumes,
Still tinge it with the hues,
Of their first mother’s voice!

From one universe to the next,
In spite of time and space,
The languages of mankind
Still seek each other out…
Let their sounds embrace,
Let their melodies mingle,
Let their clamors entwine!

For even these sweet words,
Stolen from France’s lips,
With impassioned affection
Quivering in my heart,
Still taste on my lips,
Where my smiling sorrow sits,
Still taste of a Lebanese kiss.
Saïd Akl
Yaara (Translated from dialectal Lebanese)

Of course I have loved others!
But you?
With all the beauty teeming in your eyes,
Even long before you had come into being,
I raised to you an impassioned quivering prayer,
Long before the birth of time.

And when, still drowsy
From having been a dream
For far too long,
You slipped out of a ruptured comet,
God’s splendid handiwork…
And as you had yet no lilies for playmates,
I plucked from your face
Little bits of dawn
And hues of ambrosia
—–from a face that eclipsed the sun—
And out of your radiant eyelashes,
Which shook History out of slumbers,
I pitched the world with flowers,
So that if I were to ever lose you,
I may still stumble upon
your dainty footsteps,
Buried inside some rose petal.

Saïd Akl
Cadmus (Qadmus, Translated from Arabic)

Europa to Cadmus:
Have you, Cadmus, become this narrow,
When my homeland’s compassion can contain this entire universe,
With all its living, and all its dead?!
[…] I am my country, Cadmus,
and Lebanon is a covenant!
It is neither Cedars, nor Mountains,
Nor gushing Springs.
My country is love and compassion!
And there isn’t pride or rancor in true love!
It is a light that does not go astray:
It is diligence,
And a hand spawning beauty and wisdom.
Do not say “My Nation” and overrun the universe!
We are neighbors and kinfolk
To all Mankind, Cadmus!

[...]  
For this
I abandoned my mother’s embrace.
I abandoned the unmatched spirit,
The friendship
Of children of my race;
I abandoned my own father,
His dignity, his grace;
I left behind me the vigor of my brother Cadmus,
The zest of youth;
I left behind me
Emerald villages sparkling with blue light,
Perched in the neighborhood of clouds,
Crossing into the Sun’s playground,
Pitching my homeland on the thresholds of Heaven.

[...]

**Mira to Europa:**
And it was you, Europa, who said:
*Send me forth, from my homeland,*
*First thing tomorrow a dawn,*
*A message of love*
*Bursting with affection and friendship*
*Across the universe!*

And soon they shall learn,
How upon our vessels
We have borne guidance and tranquility to the universe.
Therefore, what would you say if we were to name this Western wilderness
After you, Europa?
Would that be presumptuous
Or strange?
After all, weren’t we the first pioneers
To have ever plowed this universe for its bounty,
And dreamt up glories,
With eyes yearning for the stars?
Be then, O wasteland,
A namesake for Europa,
The land of good fortune,
The land of reason,
And the land of elegance and beauty!!
Then, as our arms shall knock on the gates of earth,
Enchanting her with streams of blooming fields,
Our splendor as dauntless benevolent settlers,
Aboard mankind’s earliest sailboats,
Shall go on sailing in search of new horizons,
Shall go on tossing land
In the embrace of land…
O curdling blood, flowing like deserts of idle talk,
O blood weaving tragedy and twilight,
Perish, wither away!

The magic of Arab history has ended.
Come along with me, let us bury its ignoble face,
And lay to rest its dull heritage,
And pardon us, forgive us
O gazelle horns, o antelope eyes…

I am confused, my country,
For, each time I see you, you will have donned a different form.
At times I hoist you upon my forehead,
Teetering between my blood and my death:
Are you a graveyard or a rose?
I see you as children, dragging their entrails behind them,
Resigned,
Bowing obediently before their shackles,
Wearing for each crack of the whip a corresponding skin…
Are you a graveyard or a rose?

You have killed me, my country,
You have killed my songs.
Are you a bloodbath or a revolution?
I am puzzled, my country,
For, each time I see you, you will have donned a different form…

…And I chant my own calamity.
And I can no longer see myself
Save as a man on the fringes of history
Teetering on a razor’s edge /
I should hope to begin a new beginning,
But where? From where?
How shall I describe myself
And in which of my languages must I speak?
For, this Arabic language that suckles me, also cheats and betrays me

In the end, it is the Arabic language that binds and confines the Arabs to an obscure and cloistered universe wrote recently Adonis in Al-Kitaab, and Khitaab, and Hijaab (The Qoran, the Discourse, the Hijab). Arabic, he claimed, is a language that restrains and incarcerates its users and turns them into wardens overseeing their own penal colonies, regurgitating Arab and Muslim pieties and rituals that no one dares challenge; “Arabic culture is the culture of that which is divinely sanctioned and only that which is divinely sanctioned; a culture of ‘commands and taboos,’ and ‘dos and don’ts’.”
I shall embalm and purify her,
And resurrect myself on the edge of a time that has passed,
Walk on the edge of a time that is yet to come

*And yet, I am not the only one*

… And here is the gazelle of history laying my guts bare /
The river of slaves roars ^
[Nary a prophet remains among us
Who has not rendered himself a tramp
Nary a god remains /
And we think we have discovered bread /]
We discovered a light leading to Earth
We discovered a sun emanating from a clenched fist
Bring along your axes and follow me,
Pack up your <Allah> like a dying sheikh,
[Open a pathway to the sun away from minarets,
Open a book to a child besides the books of musty pieties,
And cast the dreamer’s eye away from Medina and Kufa /
Bring along your axes

*I am not the only one…* 16

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16 Emphasis and random punctuations and brackets in the original. This was one of the many ways in which Adonis plied his language, in both form and content, to reflect the fragmentation of Arab culture and the Arab self; textual and linguistic fragmentation emulating the social, cultural, and political fragmentation of the Arabs so to speak.
Adonis: The Language of Sin

I set my heritage alight,
I say my soil is lain fallow
And there are no graveyards in my youth,
I cross over Allah and Satan,
For the path I seek goes beyond the ways of gods and devils,

I cross over in my book,
In the procession of the luminous thunderbolt,
I shout – no Heaven and no Fallen Angels shall remain after me,
And I erase the language of sin.

Adonis: To Sisyphus
To Halim Barakat

I pledged to write on water
I pledged to help Sisyphus with his
Deaf stone.

I pledged to remain with Sisyphus
To subject myself to fever and heat
To search within the poisonous quarries
For one last feather
With which to write to the autumn and grass
A poem of dust

I pledged to live with Sisyphus

Chapter 2

Arabic Nuances

Allow me to criticize the Arabs, to criticize myself! Criticism is warranted and legitimate, as long as it is fair and just. And when one speaks of Arabs, a clear distinction needs to be made between Arabs as individuals and human beings, and Arabs as an institution, as a national concept, as establishments, and as regimes, (and this, incidentally, applies to all peoples against whom a just and warranted critique must be leveled.)

One of my overriding ambitions as a person and a poet is to wipe out paternalism where paternalism is deemed a social manifestation of the Divine, where it plays a negative, debilitating, emasculating, castrating role in society. If my aim is to do away with the concept of God’s singularity—or uniqueness—this aim applies all the more to the concept of the singularity—or uniqueness—of the father, of paternity, and paternalism. For, uniqueness of the father figure in our Arab societies has also contributed to the marginalization, nay the eradication, of motherhood, maternity, womanhood, and femininity. In our Arab societies womanhood, in the shadow of our social paternalism, has become well-nigh non-existent. Were paternalism an upright and virtuous concept, one needn’t call it paternalism. For, in that case, that upright and virtuous paternalism, that paternity, would be widespread and prevalent throughout life and friendships; it would be human and humane, unlike paternalistic absolutist fatherhood.

Modern Iraq, for instance, was the outcome of the father and the blunder of the father—that is to say the father incarnated in the person of the leader. And in that case, the omnipotent, omniscient father had at one point become so full of himself, so blinded to everything around him but himself. He thus proceeded to anoint himself in the image of the absolute, the supreme father. He so loved his so-called children, that he no longer was able to see them, and he ended up annihilating them. Unfortunately, Iraq was but the tip of the iceberg. All political leaders, throughout the Arab world are fathers; absolute demiurges, tyrannical, abominable father figures. Therein dwells one of the foundational constitutive elements of Arab civilization. Therein dwells the major ill of Arab society; an omnipresent totalitarian paternalism that must be eradicated by any means possible.

Paternalism exists elsewhere, of course. In America it takes the form of a hegemonic proclivity defined by raw concrete—physical, military, economic—power. American paternalism is often expressed by a need to police and reorder the world. It is a paternalism akin to authoritarianism. However, the United States do not suffer of the kind of paternalism afflicting the Arabs, the primitive retrograde arbitrary male-
chauvinistic “fatherly” kind of paternalism. Other patterns of relationships exist within American society. There are no “President in the image of the Father” patterns of relationships in America—that is to say non in the way such patterns pervade Arab societies. There are no President-demiurges in America. Indeed, in America, the country itself, in its entirety, is a demiurge vis-à-vis other nations. And this stems from a form of innocuous patriotism spouted by most Americans. Conversely, in the Arab world, the man in power is at once a President, a Prince, a King, and a Father. This cultural flaw stems from the totalitarianism pervading Arab societies; a deep-seated, almost congenital, despotic proclivity.

In the Arab world, the children, the country itself, the army, the present, the future, all the constitutive elements of the nation, revolve around the person of the President-Father. If the people are defeated, it is the Father himself who suffers defeat and bears the burdens of defeat. The people are but mere sideshows, incidentals, paraphernalia; they abide by and admit victory and defeat. But it is the President-Father who, in reality, clinches victories and suffers defeats. Indeed, there can be no victories without him, and defeats are not necessarily his fault or his responsibility. That is the basic structure of Arab societies. That is precisely why such societies have never, at any time in their history, known democracy in any sense of the word. The Arab world is the epitome of patriarchy. Citizens gain—or lose—relevance depending on their relationships with and their “obedience” to their leader, their “Father.” [...] And this, actually, has plenty to do with the Arabs’ religious concept of “submission.”

[...] Yes, all is in need of revamping and changing in my society. My peers and I live in a society that must be reconstituted, from A to Z, on every single plane and from every facet possible. One must take a completely new look at that society—a society for which I have the utmost attachment and affection. But fact remains Arabs have a tough task before them; they must be open to the notion that individuals are free to see things from their own perspective and react to society and the world around them according to their own means of expression and from the bias of their own concerns.

In order to better understand my poetry, one must read it from this perspective; one must realize that I am the product of a society that is in dire need of rebuilding, from the foundations up; a society whose culture and politics must be re-examined with a fresh new set of eyes; a society in which I find nothing worth defending, nothing worth safeguarding, nothing worth adopting or learning from. I come from a society that is still living in a primordial political and social state; a society still stuck at ground-zero, ground zero in the sense that everything about that society needs to be redefined, reviewed, reinvented, and remade. It is this distressing situation that constitutes the background of my poetry, that drives my poetry, and that illuminates my poetic vision—which is not only purely literary, and not only purely linguistic. What concerns me is that my poetry be visionary, innovative, inspired; that it participates in spawning a new

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17 Adonis’s French allusion here is to Islam, both theologically and etymologically; in Arabic, the word “islam” literally means “submission,” in the same sense in which Adonis used the French “soumission.”
18 Adonis called this “being stalled between seasons” in his Elegy for the Time at Hand.
society, a new culture, a new civilization. A poet is an artist whose craft is a feat; an act of creation, an act of life. There is no living poetry except that spawned through a new poem. If poetry is not in a constant state of renewal, it is dead poetry, written in a dead language that is no longer capable of communing with the word, with the language of life and action. Creating poetry in a language that spawns a new society, a new culture, and a new set of relations among members of that society or that culture is a fundamental—nay, an urgent—necessity in Arab societies; a necessity that inspires and possesses me in the heat of poetic creation. And, naturally, my aim is always to create friendships, love, and a new esthetic, in constant renewal.

On an international global level, it is shameful to watch innocent children die of hunger. Similarly, on an Arab level, it is shameful to have let a hoodlum like Saddam Hussein remain at the helm of government in Iraq. It is ignominy and humiliation for the Arabs to have produced leaders of Saddam’s stripe. Saddam has mass-murdered rebels and innocent civilians, and he never stopped. He went so far as to order the mass-murder of those merely suspected of rebellion, summarily, without due process. [...] Iraq was hell on earth. [...] If anyone dared make so much as a whimper to bring this situation, this painful reality to light, they were summarily executed, exterminated! For instance, if anyone dared take any measure deemed noxious to the reality of Iraq’s dictatorship, not only would they have been executed, but their entire families, their brothers and children were likewise liquidated. In the warped vision of the tyrant, society must be purified, cleansed of those who defy or criticize it; the people must be cleansed, the impure must be cleansed—liquidated—for merely saying “no” to the ruthless Father. [...] Ever since its infancy, Islamic society and the Islamic religion have reinforced this sort of absolutism and this sort of opposition to change. Islam actually reinforced and institutionalized these pre-Islamic patterns of relationships, these primordial structures of pre-Islamic Arabian societies. But instead of obedience and submission to the “tribe”, Islam postulated obedience and submission to the “Umma”.

[...]
The Arabs have, historically speaking, constructed a society consumed by continuous disputes and warfare. Never, in the span of almost sixteen centuries, has the war among Arabs or among Muslims abated. To this day this continuous war rages on; not only pitting Arabs against foreigners, but also Arabs against each other. One could say that for the past sixteen centuries the strength and the energies of the Arabs are being squandered in fratricidal conflicts. What are the reasons for this? Perverse and harmful paternalism!

*I refuse to recognize the other. He who is not like me, he who does not share my views is to be cast off. The entire world must ‘repeat after me’, the entire world must acquiesce to my whims and abide by my worldview; otherwise it’s banishment or imprisonment or worse.*

Throughout our history, brutal gangs have always monopolized political power in our midst. Never through our long history has there been an experiment or a tradition in universal suffrage or democratic elections; we’ve always been stuck in absolutism and
authoritarianism. Why? because in our part of the world religion is intimately linked to politics. As long as a separation between the religious and the temporal is not instated, there will never be democracy in Arab societies.

[...]

Chapter 5

The Arabs and the West

One must never generalize and fall prey to jaded bromides such as “the Arabs are ignorant, despotic, anti-Western, terrorists, etc…” To the contrary; most Arabs are exquisitely wise, kind, and reasoned individuals! One must never identify Muslims with Muslim fundamentalists, nor it fair to conflate peoples and regimes. Falling into that trap is an exercise in reductionist dogmatism; it serves doctrine, not comprehension. Being a Muslim is an issue of faith, not politics. People deserve that their creeds be respected. Personally, in my capacity as an artist and a poet, I am firmly opposed to institutionalized religion, even if I am in favor of individual religious rights and freedom of religious practice. I am against religion as an institution imposed on the whole of society; I am not against the individual possessed of religious conviction; I have tremendous respect for the human being, and therefore for that human being’s faith, so long as this faith is not transformed into a general set of laws. Society must be civil, secular, benefiting from civil laws that respect diversity, particularism, and pluralism. Faith is a private intimate matter, and individuals should be free in their choice and their expression of their religious beliefs. Being an atheist is an expression of a certain belief! One can believe in the invisible without necessarily being a mystic. [...] I for one, am a pagan mystic. Mysticism, to my sense, is founded on the following elements: firstly, that reality is comprehensive, boundless, unrestricted; it is both what is revealed and visible to us, and what is invisible and concealed. Secondly, that which is visible and revealed to us is not necessarily an actual expression of truth; it is perhaps an expression of a superficial, transitory, ephemeral aspect of truth. To be able to truthfully express reality, one must also seek to see that which is concealed. Thirdly, truth is not ready-made, prefabricated. [...] We don’t learn the truth from books! Truth is to be sought out, dug up, discovered. Consequently, the world is not finished business. It is in constant flashes of revelation, creation, construction, and renewal of imageries, relationships, languages, words, and things. Identity itself is in a state of constant creation; a work in progress, as it were. Therefore, depicting or “writing” the world is not tantamount to expressing it as it is. Depicting the world or existence is like creating new rapports and new harmonies with words and things. [...] For instance, what I write does not merely express me. What I write completes me as a human being; it makes me into a better, more perfect individual… What I write does not express me, precisely because a word is never capable of fully or accurately expressing a thing, an inanimate object. How can it then express a complex human being? Words express aspects, and only aspects of things; forms without essence. My writings are a continuation of my existence; they are my other self. [...] In this sense, the world is one, single. The West and the East are not
separable. This is the kind of mysticism to which I belong. This is how I see myself as a mystic. The being is one. Knowledge, science, philosophy are an inseparable unit.

The East is a source of enlightenment. With the advent of monotheism, in practice, the East became a source of twilight and violence.

In this sense, the Judeo-Christian West is but one form of the East, nicely concealed, camouflaged, made up with a great literature of tolerance. Those Westerners who continued to see the East as a source of enlightenment, and a luminous creative East, those like Hölderlin, Novalis, Goethe, Rimbaud, and Nerval, do not represent the West. Their vision of the poet, the great Western poet, has not been accepted in its essence. The political West has prosaically advanced economic and strategic aims.

One must remember that it was through Ottoman imperialism, which was in reality obscurantist, that the West sought to respond to the Muslims’ discourse. The Ottomans used to say “Westerners are backward, primitive.” After the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, Westerners took the place of the Ottomans, repeating the same clichés: Muslims are backward barbarians, and we the Westerners are civilized; we’re more human! Thus the East became “the other,” the retrograde; and if the East per chance possessed anything of worth, it must have necessarily been a Western borrowing! The West therefore became the master of the East, which had initially been the master of the West. It’s a mere role switching. With Europe’s industrial revolution, the West took its turn at the helm of imperialism, and the East became the occupied, the colonized.

One wonders if Rimbaud is an Easterner or a Westerner? Great human accomplishments and creations, the Sumerian and Babylonian Gilgamesh, the Egyptian civilization, the Greek civilization, the great masters of antiquity, etc… all represent human history. They are neither Easterners nor Westerners. They are universal. They are the great earthlings; products of our sacred planet; a great human voice that hems in continents and oceans. Of course, geographically and politically speaking, one can appreciate the fact that an East and a West do indeed exist. But if we are on a quest to interpret the human condition, if we aim to depict Man in a more human image, to elevate him to a cosmic dimension, these sorts of divisions can no longer obtain.

[...] Writing is a kind of creation. Reading is also a kind of creation. A great creator has to be a great reader. A reader is a creator in his own right. In our new mediatized Western culture, verbal creativity and poetry are not longer extant because readers are no longer part of the process. The urgency of the future is, therefore, to reinvent the future, in modern literature, and in the perspective of an authentic culture of the third millennium answering to both the West and the East.

In the Arab World, one can no longer write. People and intellectuals are harkening back to a closed, blinkered, repetitive kind of culture, where there is nary an opening to the outside, where the only “other” is Evil, Hell, Satan. The prevalent logic is the following: you are either like me, or you’re nothing. Distinctness and plurality are not accepted, let
alone are they celebrated. Arabs during the 9th and 10th centuries used to say: “I am the alterity, I am the distinctness, the distinction.” Instead of saying [in the words of the French child-poet Arthur Rimbaud] “Je est un Autre” [the “self” is “otherness”], The Arabs used to say “the ‘other’ is ‘myself’.” Today, there is a return among Arabs towards a negationist “I” which refuses the “other,” as if the “other” is not in the image of the “self.” This is a sort of “cultural pollution” whereby Arabs condone and submit to a sort of “cultural obscurantism” actuated by institutionalized religion.

[…]

Chapter 9

My Origins

I was born and raised in a cultural milieu where the individual was bereft of individuality. The individual in my society was diluted, watered-down, and hidden in an overbearing whole; this whole was the family, and we all somehow originated in that big “whole.” The notion of the Umma is one specific to Islam. The word itself, Al Umma, is the feminine form of Mother, Umm in Arabic. Therefore, my relationship with my own mother, as well as my relationship with my father, was that of individuals in the midst of a roiling sea or ocean. We were all integral parts of that ocean, tributaries of that sea, subordinates of that “mother,” the Umma… As a child, I never had a privileged relationship or a special bond with my mother. During adolescence, when I began reading books, I discovered that there was indeed a special, personal rapport, or bond as it were, between a mother and her child. I read all the works of Freud. The things about which Freud wrote belong in a universe that was utterly alien and diametrically opposed to mine. The universe into which I was born was bereft of the slightest notions of which Freud had written—neuroses, which, of course, consume the bulk of my life and work today. I grew up in a world where only the group mattered, and where the individual was but a negligible twig in a colossal tree.

I did not have a childhood in the modern Western sense. By the time I was taking my first steps, I was already treading the daily toils of my village; the life of trees, fields, hard labors, changing seasons, rivers, harvests, crops, agriculture, and tilling the soil. Thus, I was already a laborer while still a child barely out of my toddler state. Indeed, I never developed any sense of having been a child, let alone had I any sense of having

* In total opposition to the classic (Cartesian) conception of the self, Rimbaud professed a new conception, of both the self and artistic creation: to him, the poet no longer masters that which emanates from him. He used to say « J’assiste à l’éclosion de ma pensée : je la regarde, je l’écoute… »

19 The Umma in its “original” Muslim sense refers to the “community of believers,” or “the Muslim community.” It was re-semantized by Arab nationalists in the early twentieth century and used in the context of “Arab Nationalism.” And so, although the Umma had traditionally meant the “Muslim Umma,” it was normalized in the discourse of Arab nationalism to mean the “Arab Umma” or the “Arab nation.” Nevertheless, its religious (Islamic) symbolism never ceased to impinge on its newly acquired secular connotations. Today, as Arab nationalism has lost its appeal and luster, the term Umma in reference to a distinct secular “Arab nation” has fallen into desuetude.
been my own parents’ child—of course what I mean here is the Western sense of being “someone’s child.” My mother couldn’t read; she was illiterate. However, I feel that she was cultured, polished by life, by the hardships of life, by the toils of life, and by memory. I suspect that “memory” plays an extraordinary role in the lives of people who are illiterate. [...] 

To me, my mother was a tree, a speaking tree. She was also river, but a river that toiled and labored. The way I perceived her, my mother was part of nature; she was a living nature all to herself; and in that sense she had tremendous influence on me—even when we hardly spoke. Conversely, my father was cultured and educated; he taught me, tutored me, and initiated me to the rudiments of Jahiliyya poetry\textsuperscript{20}, mysticism, post-Islamic poetry, etc... But most importantly, he taught me mystic poetry. It was he who laid open before me the path to poetry. He even wrote traditional poetry himself, and it is to him that I owe my early education and general culture. At age thirteen I had not yet begun attending school. I had frequented my village’s soil and her fields until the age of thirteen, but until then I hadn’t even known or seen what a school looked like, let alone what electricity, a radio set, or a car looked like. I was an integral part of nature; like a cloud, or a tree—that’s why I say that I had never had a childhood in the modern Western conception of the term. It is now, in my old age, that I try to imagine and rediscover my childhood. It is of great importance to me now to try and remember for instance how I the first thirteen years of my life were spent. I try to picture myself at age one, two, or three for instance. It’s not easy. I sometimes ask my mother, but at her age, she’s completely lost her memories of those days. Some of my old friends from the village do jog my memory sometimes, but only with events dating back to when I was perhaps six; definitely not before then. I think that I am pretty much cut off from my childhood. That is perhaps what stimulates and drives me artistically; this search for a lost childhood. Sometimes, even now in my old age, I feel as if I’m inventing an atmosphere of childhood; as if wanting a sort of continuity or prolongation of my own childhood.

One of my childhood friends related to me how we used to learn the alphabet in the village, in the shadow of a large old tree. He told me that I hated being there, that I always found excuses to elude the teacher and slip out of “class.” Sometimes, to dissuade me from running away, the teacher would place his long flogging-cane at my feet. But I still tried to skip class. According to my friend, I was unable to sit still for two hours reading and writing; I didn’t like doing that. I must have always cherished being alone, independent, free, unbound.

I used to model sexual organs in the dirt; I would play with them, open them, and almost feel the intensity of an orgasm. The power of sexuality is amazing. Never in my life have I had any hang-ups or problems broaching sexual topics. To me, the human body is like air or water. If someone is free and uninhibited in their heads, they should ordinarily feel the same with regards to their bodies. Purity is anti-religious, because Religious-Law is unnatural and anti-human. If freedom cannot be—or cannot translate into—physical freedom, then it would be an abstraction at best. I lived my entire life doing

\textsuperscript{20} Jahiliyya refers to pre-Islamic Arabia; literally it means “ignorance” and connotes the age of decadence and primitiveness that preceded the Islamic revelation.
whatever pleased me and whatever seemed good to me. The foundation of ethics or ethical behavior is, to my sense, never hurting another…

I spent my childhood in nature. My first sexual encounters took place in nature, in the open air, in a river behind our village, where a girl slightly older that I used to take me. I must have been 12 or 13 years old back then. It was like making love to nature, to the grass and the trees, to Spring. Love was beautiful in the Spring. I used to go into this verdure every day during the Spring. To me, nature, with its green pastures and its clods of earth is very much like the female body; a sensual female body inspiring love and physical intimacy.

[...] I have chosen my name, Adonis, to liberate myself from a religious identity that was not my own choice. My chosen name opened new horizons before me; unexpected horizons in our society. This name, Adonis, delivered me from my own given name, Ali. It delivered me from a closed social appurtenance intimately linked to the constraints and restrictions of religion. Through my new, unattached identity, I laid myself open to other human beings. With Adonis, I have chosen an identity in the absolute; a pure, unlimited, free identity, rather than the restricted pre-ordained one imposed upon me by society.

I began spawning this new identity when I began honing my craft. It was then that I became conscious of the creative dimensions of my chosen name; the name of a begetter, a creator, a generator of life. The outcome of this journey is that I’m still in the process of creating, recreating and re-generating my own identity. This experience has taught me that identity is a never-ending work in progress, a work in progress that defies death and goes on even after death. [...] I see myself at this point as an antithesis of my pre-ordained “original” identity. And I am constantly attempting to transpose this freedom, this choice of identity, so that it may create new foundations for Arab culture, to create a new Arab culture and a new Arab identity; one open to the concept of a free elective identity.

Given that everything of value in my society is religious, that all aspects of life are dominated by religion, and that this religion of the Muslims is not only rituals and faith—but most importantly perhaps, language—religion is at once culture, identity, and a set of values. That is why my own liberation was actuated by my attempts to liberate the Arabic language. And as soon as I felt liberated, I began realizing that the “I,” “the self,” would be unable to comprehend itself if it did not attempt to understand ‘the other.” By the same token, I could not understand the East without attempting to understand the West—just as the West itself remains untrue to itself without attempting to understand the East. Cultural identity is like love; it is a continuous dialogue, and alliance between the “self” and the “other.” For, the “other” is not only an expression of a need for dialogue; rather, the “other” is a fundamental component of the “self”; a tongue that communicates in many tongues.
As a matter of principle I am unopposed to religious traditions and religious cultures. Religion and its messages of salvation and peace must be accepted and indeed respected. The problem arises when religious beliefs and scriptures become a general standard, an overarching rule, and a sole prism through which all truths and all principles are measured, interpreted and determined. This is the Arabs’—and in a more general sense the Muslims’—predicament. The fact that religion is at once a set of scriptures and a legal, cultural, social, and political charter that can neither be questioned nor opposed, and one that enslave[s] man’s life and thought process, is at the root of the Arabs’ malaise. The Arab’s inability to question or defy inherited assumptions is a form of servitude borne out of religious resignation. To think outside of a religious context is to besmirch Islamic tradition. And those who besmirch Islamic tradition are divested of their freedom and their humanity. Suffice it to say that verbal radicals of the word “thought” in Arabic also form the word “blasphemy.”

By the same token, the letters of the word Allah [God] are the same ones used to write Aalah, or tool, contraption, or device. With their almost obsessive valorization of all that emanates from Allah [both as God and Device], the Arabs reject the possibility of dialogue with those who don’t share their values and belief systems. In times past the Arabs had a wealth of possessions to bequeath to the “other”; and the “other” has indeed taken plenty from the Arabs, integrated the knowledge and bequests of the Arabs and rendered them part of the “other’s” own intellectual patrimony. But this form of intellectual intercourse has long since ended, and the Arabs of today have precious little to offer the world in terms of philosophy, science, technology, freedoms, democratic values, arts, literatures, or human rights. And this deficit in “dialogue” or intellectual intercourse is an Arab ailment par excellence. But who and what is an Arab to begin with?

Is today’s “Arab” an incarnation of Arab history and the Arabs’ past? If the answer is “yes,” then it is an indication of the Arab’s utter absence and hiatus from the realities of the present. For, the Arab of today is an inconsequential specter and a ghost. What good is one’s relationship with the past if that past’s values have been superseded and can no longer meet the needs of modern life? Indeed, I believe that the Arabs of today bear not the slightest resemblance to the Arabs of yore—those whom they claim to be the modern incarnation. The Arabs of today derive and receive far more from their immediate non-Arab contemporaries than they do from their alleged Arabian forefathers. If only for this,
the Arabs should take heed and cease depicting themselves as a unique eternal immutable essence, immune to transformation, evolution, and change.\textsuperscript{22}

Another sign of the severe deficit in “dialogue” between the “Arab” and the “other” in his midst relates to the Arabs’ rejection of the “other”; a rejection that reveals profound defects in the Arabs’ own social and civil structures—not to mention defects of a more serious cultural and intellectual order. The rejection of the “other” in the canon of Arab nationalism is a consequence of Islam’s disposition vis-à-vis non-Muslims; an attitude that views the “other” as a lesser being unworthy of dignity and consideration otherwise reserved for Muslims.

Is Islam—and its Arab nationalist incarnation—compatible with democracy? The answer is probably “no,” for, democracy is a series of cultural and political practices centered around the idea of plurality, pluralism, and acceptance—not mere tolerance—of the “other.” Islam has traditionally dealt with the “other” as an inferior being, a “dhimmi,” a devalued human being that is different—albeit tolerated in his “difference”—but never accepted as a full equal member of society. In that sense, Islam cannot be compatible with democracy if the foundational tenets of democracy are understood to include “acceptance” of the “other” as equal. What’s more, even a Muslim is forbidden from relinquishing Islam, and in the event that he did, is viewed as a heretic and an apostate whose murder is legally and religiously sanctioned. If that is the case, how can Islam be compatible with democracy, which not only celebrates difference but also sanctions and sanctifies it?

\textsuperscript{22} This is a reference to Michel Aflaq and the \textit{Baath} party’s definition of the Arabs as a “single uniform immutable nation, carrier of an eternal mission…”

You are unquestionably what you are, the way you are, O Lebanon! A precious little promontory drawn out of the placid daters of the Mediterranean, standing sentry in the face of the rising sun, hoisting your distinctive outlines above the edge of a restless Asia. O, you, small heap of limestone and marl, pricked by rugged greeneries; what is it exactly that which confers upon you that special distinction? Is it because you are this bright speck of light on a barely comprehensible map; a small stain of white and ochre around which revolves a 6,000-year-old story and a timeless history? All of the planet’s reflexes clamor and echo within you, making you the world’s most sensitive and vibrant meeting place of peoples and cultures. They are certainly indigenous to your shores all these peoples hailing from all the other “elsewhere,” dropping anchor at your harbors. For as far back as the memory can stretch, you have been the meeting place of all of Man’s major undertakings. O, land of pure untamed impulse, what is the secret of your order? What is the secret of your defiant equilibrium? A hundred times sentenced to death, you still prove your vibrancy and your life simply by living. You are this country where not once in the past twenty-five years have two official clocks succeeded in marking the same hour; where any form of national prerogative can be vetoed by a mortician and a hearse-driver. Must you forever look catastrophe in the eye, forever walk on the edge of the abyss, yet never falter and never fall? O Lebanon, O most enchanting mess, O most sweet injustice in a world ravaged by excesses of justice and order.
Write down in your ledger!
I am an Arab,
And my serial number is 50000
I have eight children,
With a ninth one on the way…
Expected next summer.

Write it down in your ledger!
I am an Arab,
And I toil
Alongside my brothers in agony,
In a stone-quarry.
I have eight children,
To whom I pilfer bread
Clothing and notebooks,
From the austerity
Of the boulders of my quarries…
I won’t beg you for handouts,
And I won’t grovel
At the doorsteps
Of your palace!
So tell me,
Does my pride anger you?

Write down in your ledger!
I am an Arab,
I am a name without surname
Or title,
I am eternal, and I’m tireless,
In a land where all is impulse
And sudden surges of anger…
My roots are embedded
In the confines of times older than Time,
Long before cypress and olive trees
Gushed out of the soil…
Long before a blade of grass
Ever sprouted or saw the sun…
My father,
Like his father before him,
Hailed from a lineage of field ploughs,
Not from blue-blooded high-brows!!
He taught me devotion to the earth and sky,
And he taught me dignity,
Before teaching me to love books and written words.
Our house is a humble
Watchman’s thatch cabin!
So, tell me,
Does my stature—or lack thereof—please you?
I am a name, without surname
Or title!

Write down in your ledger!
I am an Arab,
My hair color is coal black,
My eye color is brown,
And my distinguishing features are as follows:
I wear a kaffiya and a ‘ugal,
The calluses on my hands are harder than rock…
Grating to the most tenuous touch…
And my address??
I’m from an unarmed village..
Suspended in time..
It’s streets have no names,
It’s men invested
In their fields and quarries!
So tell me,
Does that upset or anger you?

Write down in your ledger!
I am an Arab,
Whose ancestors’ orchards
Have been plundered,
Whose land—the fruit of my
And my own children’s labors—
Was despoiled and stolen..
Nothing was left for me
And my progeny,
Save these few barren boulders..
Tell me,
Will your State still come and take them
As it’s been said??..
In that case,
Write down in your ledger, won’t you!?
Write this down on the top of your first page:
I haven’t hated anyone,
Nor have swindled anyone,
Nor have I encroached on anyone!
But if I’m made to go hungry
The usurper’s flesh shall be my food,
Beware, beware
Beware of my hunger,
Beware of my anger!

فهل ستأخذها حكومتكم
كما قيل!؟
إذن!
سجل. برأس الصفحة الأولى
أنا لا أكره الناس ولأ أسطو على أحد
ولكني إذا ما جعث
أكل لحم مغتصبي
حذر.. حذر...
من جوعي ومن غضبي!!
I long for my mother’s bread,
For my mother’s coffee,
And my mother’s touch…
Then childhood memories begin surging within me
Day after day,
And so, I begin to cherish my life,
For if I were to die one day,
I’d be ashamed
Of the thought of bringing tears to Mother’s eyes…

And if I were to come back to you
Take me as veil over your eyelashes,
Cover my bones with fresh grass
Hallowed by your sainted footsteps,
And bind my shroud with a lock of your hair
Or with a loose thread trailing your dress tails
So that I may become immortal,
Become a god, through your touch….
If I were to come back to you one day
Feed me to the fire of your bread-hearth,
Or string me as a clothesline
On the rooftop of your house,
For I can no longer bear the weight
Of spending one more day far from your grace.
I have grown old without you.
Give me back
The stars of my childhood
So that I may share,
With the swallows,
The pathway back
To the nest of your waiting embrace.