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The Literary Work as a Debt to Beauty

Tahar Bekri

One day, Nobel prize winner Claude Simon was invited by the *Writers' Union* in Moscow and was asked the following question: "What are your current concerns?" And, here is his answer: "My problem is how to start a sentence and then finish it." I, for one, know that literature is first of all a matter of writing, of words, of speech, of language, of form and style.

Yet perhaps since the Babylonian epic of *Gilgamesh*, the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, also called *Book of Coming Forth by Day*, 1700 BCE, and of course the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (8thc BCE), literary creation (this marvelous adventure of the human spirit that is literature), turned language into something unsettling and moving, beyond the words as such. Is this because literature begets the [spoken] words that express our innermost feelings, and eternal questions about life, love, or death; or because it expresses visions of the world; or because sometimes literature is a human battle, permanent, fragile, visionary and prophetic? Or even, like Sisyphus's or Don Quixote's battles, all too human, and therefore perhaps tragic or laughable?

Along these lines, can the literary work elude the mystery of art or the importance of ideas for poetic creation? As Mallarmé retorted to Degas, "it is not with ideas that one writes poetry, but with words." Even so, it is legitimate to wonder whether a literary work can be self-sufficient; whether it can limit itself to a stylistic exercise, to an aesthetic quest for its own sake; whether it is a matter involving only language and words. I do not claim here to offer answers to this broad field of reflection on the question of literature, all the more so if the answers were to come too easily; instead I want to bring to your attention a few reflections and personal testimonies about a

tortuous and complex, yet always open-ended, trajectory: literature, this passionate adventure, is, to me, an exacting labour that implicates one's own being.

I could state straight away my conviction that literary works are written in the midst of doubt and questioning, interrogation, ambivalence and ambiguity, in short, while one is searching for truths; this search is sustained by an inner fire which tries to reach hidden depths, so as to give them expression in a language that always struggles to find its words, and all the more so if the language in which one writes is not one's mother tongue, a foreign language, which is my case. I will return to this question later on; but, it is no platitude to say that in the field of writing any language is a foreign language. I could add to this that writing is speaking in silence, with all the eloquence, the sense and the meaning that is borne by silence. Perhaps, poetry is placed there: in the economy of the word, in allusion, in metaphor, suggestiveness; poetry is not to be found in explanation, in redundancy or paraphrase. The work becomes light enmeshed in shadow; it is inhabited by antagonism, painful agony and inner turmoil, it is a loving rebellion at a remove from simplifying assertions, or didactic and all too tedious ideologies. We need only to think of socialist realism, of a work which is his master's voice and a means of propaganda; there is no need to recall here how fatal this has been for so many works that History has cast into oblivion!

The literary work that makes us attentive is above all an act of freedom; it is freed from political, social, religious, or ideological, and, perhaps, linguistic enslavement. The literary work is a singular human experience; it resists opprobrium, fights against degradation, sings for dignity, celebrates being and life. It is not hard to cite examples of literary works that are transgressive, and salutary in their anti-conformism; that rebel against collectively or officially sanctioned weightiness; oppose the willpower of fixed dogma; unsettle the weighty and suffocating reassurances of secular thought. I would like to take two examples from contemporary Arabic literature: in Copley Square, Boston, there is a monument erected as a tribute to the English-speaking Lebanese poet and painter, the arab-american, Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), author of *The Prophet*, of *The Music*, of *Sand and Foam*, etc. In the freezing cold of the American winter, I wanted to track the traces of this writer who I used to read as an adolescent in Tunisia, and whose poetic aphorisms and spiritualist thoughts were so uplifting for the soul, so elevating for love, art, and beauty, and for the human condition itself which he has so well described in *Broken Wings*.

Khalil Gibran had also lived in Europe and was a friend of Rodin: thanks to his far-eastern influences, he brought a new spirituality to Arab culture, and at the same time he shook up the Christian tradition. It did not take long for the clergy to start

attacking his work. All prophets are a threat to the established order, even if still nowadays Gibran's *The Prophet* is among the most read books in the world. Khalil Gibran belongs to the writers of the Arab exile, the "*Al Mahjar*"; he is among those who have migrated to the United States, Argentina, Brazil, the Americas, in the beginning of the twentieth century and over the years. The works of these writers in exile, in touch with the literature of the Western world, were, through their boldness and thematic innovations, seminal for the making of the Arab literary modernity during the colonial period, that marked the young Tunisian poet (1909-1934) during the colonial period. Let me now come to my second example: rebelling against colonial tyranny, fighting oppression and humiliation, al-Shabbi expressed his opposition, in his collection of poems *The Songs of Life*, shortly before he died at the age of twenty-five. With the ardour of youth, Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi in this work, celebrates nature, beauty, love, freedom, the poetic imagination, and calls for a new vision of the Arab woman. What is more, in "The Unknown Prophet," like Gibran, al-Shabbi appeals, at will, to the dignity of the people:

If the people one day decide to live / Fate needs to respond
Night needs to dissipate / Chains need to be broken¹

These lines, which are now part of Tunisia's national anthem, were sung by thousands of protesters during the recent Arab rebellions. However, this very poem, "The will to live," was the cause of the author's conviction for heresy in the 1930s. The loneliness of art that Rainer Maria Rilke talks about is very real indeed. Because even today, al-Shabbi's loneliness endures and his struggle for the affirmation of the human will before Destiny is considered blasphemous by numerous salafist fundamentalists. What is more, they have rewritten and misquoted the poem on many websites, in order to subject it to God's Will. al-Shabbi's freedom is always unsettling, its share in the course of History notwithstanding. Through translations that appeared in the Arab Middle East, al-Shabbi discovered the French Romantics rather late. And since we can establish that he had no knowledge of poetic movements like surrealism, futurism or dadaism, we can very well see al-Shabbi as one of the founders of Arab literary modernity because of his themes at least, since the form of his poetry remained classical. Gibran and al-Shabbi alike are thieves of fire and their modernity, well before the modernity of the Syrian-Lebanese Adonis, had to face conservatism, an immovable weightiness, the definitive shutting down of the process of innovation. Every work that questions an ancestral heritage and attempts to become unchained is led to ask the nagging question: what is modernity? With regard to French literature, for instance, is it inevitably that of Baudelaire, or is modernity throughout literary history relative and specific? This, to me, is a most fascinating comparative project that will always challenge me.

I have read both Khalil Gibran and Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi; their works were part of my “book of sand” (*El libro de arena*, 1975), to remember Jorge Luis Borges (1889-1986). What I mean here is that a literary work that writes itself infinitely (as inexhaustible and immense as grains of sand), makes us realise our inability to grasp all that is being written by the human spirit; thereby our pride is thwarted, and so much the better. We ought to learn a lot from literature and its obstacles, from its accumulated knowledges and its entangled pages; from this human relaying within which we discover more than we invent. Such is Umberto Eco’s good fortune in *The Open Work*. In Borges’s novella from *El Aleph* (1949) “Averroes’ Search”, the great philosopher and Andalusian Muslim theologian of the twelfth century, commentator of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Ibn Rushd/Averroes (1126-1198) could not translate corresponding terms for Greek comedy and tragedy: both the art of literature and the performing arts were underestimated by the Arabs until the nineteenth century. Borges gives us a great lesson in modesty. Our knowledge of literature is limited by definition, and requires a tireless quest, laborious and disheartening at times; yet literature’s nourishing springs are so beneficial, in order for us to go beyond a real or imaginary frontier. But do we actually know where a boundary exists in the field of creation? And I think here of Claudio Magris whom I had the pleasure to meet in Trieste, and to whom I passed on the greetings of our mutual friend, the Algerian writer, Mohamed Dib.

With literature, we can transcend boundaries and travel in time and space; this I attempted to do since my youth in order to discover the beauty, the vastness, and the richness of the cultures of this world. I expect literature to take me further and further in an initiatory and liberatory journey that would open gates to the seven wonders of the world. Just imagine a young man in the palm groves of Southern Tunisia, at the edge of the desert, reading Pushkin in his snowy landscapes! So many Russian and Scandinavian writers were inviting me to this North that, as a southerner, I felt I needed, partly in order to stop being the observed and become an observer in my turn, to leave behind the mythologised Orient of Pierre Loti, Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, Nerval, or Chateaubriand. Does a writer from the South have a North? Why is it that a writer like the Swedish Gunnar Ekelöf (1907-1968) could write his *Diwan Trilogy*, and the third volume – *The Tale of Fatumeh* – in particular, inspired by soufism and Turkish Muslim mysticism, while a writer from the South can only turn his gaze towards the South? Why is it that Goethe (1749-1832) turned to Persian Islam in his *West-Eastern Divan* (1919), and not a single writer from the South thought this striking or noteworthy? Does the literary work need to stay bound to one’s own immediate concerns, to one’s own restricted territories?

I admit that our South, which, by the way, I wonder where its border would be set, is ridden by troubles and conflicts, while the North can leisurely turn its gaze to other skies, and search for literary inspirations elsewhere. However, to me, this imbalanced relation is an intolerable menace, as it encloses, immobilises and fossilises, so to speak, one's own identity. What prevents me then from inverting the North-South relation, so that it becomes South-North? An identity that fears the Other stagnates and dies, or else, becomes dangerous and murderous, to remember the Franco-Lebanese Amin Maalouf's *Murderous Identities*.² But this was not always the case in Arabic literature and especially in the travel writing from the Middle Ages: Ibn Fadhlān, in his travel narrative *Voyage to the Volga Bulgarians* (921) describes «الروس / the Russians», the Slavs, the Vikings, the people of the Volga... So many travel writers, or geographers have set out to discover the Other, describe the Other's culture or the Other's religion, driven by curiosity and a will to knowledge: the Moroccan, Al Idrissi (1099-1161) who was in the service of Roger II in Palermo, wrote *The Pleasure of him who wants to discover the World*, commonly known as Roger's book; al-Mas'udi (9th-10thc) wrote his *Fields of Gold*; Marco Polo's contemporary, Ibn Battūta (1304-1377) in the narrative of his voyage to the borders of China, also described Constantinople. So many writers discovered the wonders of the world and turned their gaze to the Other without adversity or violence; certainly, their gaze was prejudiced and/or estranging at times, yet subscribing to the fundamental idea in Islam, that it is the duty of the Muslim to discover and to know the earth that belongs to God. Needless to say, rereading and returning to these authors always fills me with a nostalgia that is hard to fend off, as these times seem by now too distant and buried under the piles of the dust of current events. And this is why I often found myself rigorously re/researching the traces of certain Arab writers in order to rewrite modernity. Let me tell you that in doing so, I join the Mexican Octavio Paz whose words I have used in the inscription to my collection of poems, *The Rosaries of Attachment* (1993):³ "One day I discovered I was going back to the starting point instead of advancing: the search for modernity was a descent to the origin."⁴

This is why in my attempt to investigate wandering in modernity, I first went after the traces of Imru'ul Qays, the wandering king of sixteenth century Arabia; of Ibn Hazm (Jativa 994-1064), author of the famous *Ring of the Dove*. In my attempt to probe exile, love, the rise of religious intolerance and the fall of dynasties, I lastly went after the traces of the Anatolian Turc, Yunus Emre, (1240-1321), the great Sufi poet of mystical love, in order to probe modern Islam in-between laicity and religious faith, as the current context of the revolutions in the Arab world obliges us to do so.

As far as I am concerned, the literary work does not have the luxury to be lighthearted because the questions that it needs to ask are way too important.

Numerous global events are assaulting me everyday and leave me pained, astonished, and afraid. How can one possibly accept the indefensible 9/11? How can one accept that in 1985, the former president Gaddafi initiated a campaign to destroy Western musical instruments, and grand pianos were broken to pieces in Libya? How can one remain silent when the former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), banned the broadcasting of Western music in national radio and television? A poet cannot remain indifferent in a world in which pianos are broken into pieces, Mozart and Beethoven are banned. Before such ugliness, the debt to beauty is a moral responsibility; an ethics and an imperative; a literary and artistic value. Concerns of this kind propelled me to write the collection of poems *If the music must die*.⁵

I only have my pen to fight against the darkness that comes upon me from without, and I am trying to tell this in Arabic and French, the two languages that I was taught in a post-independence Tunisian school. This bilingualism has enriched me and brought me a lot; and I have assumed and claimed this bilingualism as a possibility of a needed dialogue between texts and cultures. And it is a privilege to be able to engage in such a dialogue so freely.

It is of little consequence whether/if I am francophone ou arabophone, or both, what matters is not to be silenced as other literary voices have been silenced: Garcia Lorca, Antonio Machado, Max Jacob, Robert Desnos, Walter Benjamin, Primo Levi, Nazim Hikmet, Boris Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn, Joseph Brodsky, Vaclav Havel, Milosz, Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen, Bryten Brytenbach, Tahar Djaout, Mahmoud Darwich, etc., the list, alas, could go on.

We need to uphold the beauty of art before its enemies, before the blindness that is spreading across the world. To this end, we need to reconstruct the Tower of Babel, build an understanding between languages and cultures, leave the doom of cacophony behind us, without pride, without hegemonic intentions. Still, I am neither a blissful, nor a naïve optimist, because the body of literature also has flaws, ugly stains, fanatical nationalism, persistent prejudices, its grey zones: Drieu La Rochelle, Céline who became an antisemite, the Norwegian Knut Hamsun who collaborated with the Nazis, Peter Handke who attended the funeral of the war criminal Milosevic with a rose in his hand. This is why the literary work compels us to be vigilant, to be on the lookout for unwanted deviations, for the failure to uphold the fundamental values of Humanity. The art which is a debt to beauty constitutes an act of a culture that forms the basis of civilisations. Without them, our humanity will be reduced to a ferocious jungle. Art can help us build a fraternal world: for the sake of this world, literature deserves the greatest sacrifices, as well as difficult yet beautiful crossings.

Translated from French by Stamatina Dimakopoulou

¹ *Translator's note*: Moulay Youness Elbousty offers alternate translations from the Arabic in his discussion of the impact of al-Shabbi's work in the recent revolutions in the Arab world, and comments: "The opening line of the poem is both cautionary and inviting. It is cautionary in the sense that pernicious consequences might be inevitable and inviting as it impels them to act with the aim of changing their situation. The opening verse is often translated as: 'If the people will to live/Providence is destined to favourably respond.' I would like to offer another reading of this opening verse: 'Should people seek or want life/Destiny will inevitably respond'. This aforementioned verse is both iconic and emblematic, especially in relation to the Arab uprisings of recent years." Youness Elbousty, "Abu al-Qasim al Shabbi's 'The Will to Live': galvanising the Tunisian revolution." *The Journal of North African Studies* 18.1:(159-163)162.

² Amin Maalouf. *Les identités meurtrières*. Paris: Grasset 1998.

³ Tahar Bekri. *Les Chapelets d'attache*. Paris: Persée, 1993.

⁴ Octavio Paz, Nobel Lecture.
<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1990/paz/lecture/>, ctd in Tahar Bekri. *Les Chapelets d'attache*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993.

⁵ Tahar Bekri. *Si la musique doit mourir*. Neuilly-sur-Seine: Al Manar, 2006.