

## **Representing the unknown**

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I am a poet. To begin with, I wavered between poetry and prose, but then I overcame my hesitation and decided to be a poet. And while the gap between poetry and prose is not unbridgeable, poetry remains something other than prose: its artfulness lies in the difficulty of converting it into narrative.

Nevertheless, the idea of writing some kind of narrative, short of a novel, stayed with me. As a journalist writing one or two articles a week, I was experienced in narration; and as a writer of “prose poetry” (free-verse?), as the name suggests, I straddled both poetry and prose. Readers of my poetry are quick to notice the use of structures and constructs that I marshal from prose: expressions such as “perhaps”, “most often”, “certainly”, “of course”, “inevitably”, “is it appropriate”, and “maybe” recur in my poetry; as do logical argumentation, narrative passages, and minutiae that seem extraneous to the needs of poetry – in short, usages which are usually associated with or specific to prose. Not only was I aware of the aesthetic nature of prose early on, but also of its poetic potential. One can find poetic elements in the most prosaic of texts, such as breaking news reports – and even texts of jurisprudence, grammar, journalism or biography are not devoid of the poetic.

Despite my familiarity with the world of prose, my first effort at narration was neither easy nor straightforward. Writing a novel wasn’t what I had in mind, initially: I wanted to write a biographical text of some kind about a risky venture that took a toll on both my life and my spirit which I wanted to document and preserve in narrative form. My intention wasn’t a literary one, and I certainly wasn’t aiming at producing a book for publication. But when I sat down to write I realized I couldn’t distance myself from the literary. In other words, I couldn’t simply write passages of factual reporting, devoid of art. In French, this is known as *déformation professionnelle*, meaning that one accustomed to writing in a certain style, with an eye to artful composition and to weighing his words, finds it impossible to write something that is devoid of that style, crafted structure or careful word choice. This was the first challenge, the difficulty of struggling with my style and my art. I would tear up the paper as soon as I began to feel that “professionalism” had taken over, that some artfulness was air-brushing the discourse, or making it excessively flowery and stretching the truth.

I had to go through several failed attempts, and I made numerous false starts. It took me a while to begin really writing this first novel which, for other very specific and unrelated reasons, has yet to be published. The fact is that the novel recounts very candidly a series of events that were public knowledge, beginning with an assassination that hasn’t yet been forgotten – despite the years that have elapsed since its occurrence – and which was preceded and followed by illicit escapades whose protagonists are still alive and known by a substantial number of people. No one would have any difficulty identifying them and this would cause yet another scandal in a small scandal-ridden society. I wrote the story with no thought of it being published, or of the consequences that publication might entail, and although I blurred all the names I didn’t mask the events. It was not until after I had finished that I realized I had spent over a year writing something that would not easily see the light of day.

But at almost 400 pages, a text of such length was an important exercise in the writing of narrative – the “exercise” wasn’t without struggle as I kept drawing on and mining my poetic art. As I said at the outset, I wavered in the beginning of my literary life between poetry and prose. As an adolescent and in my early youth, I wrote short stories, plays, and poems, as well as political articles and even

literary criticism. I belonged to a generation of intellectuals and writers who were all pretty much that way: the political and cultural context in which we operated didn't allow for developing distinctive roles, or any kind of division of labor or specializations. None of us made differentiated between theory and practice, between literature and politics, or between literature and philosophy, economics, and the humanities in general. In those days, it seemed to us that everything blended together, that we all faced the same historical givens, that everything had to happen simultaneously and that we, as activists, had to do it all. As a result, we all "arrived" late in life and took a long time finding our own particular paths. We were even late to start publishing work in our own names.

Most of us had embraced a revolutionary way of thinking – call it Marxism, if you will. According to this view, the political, social, and cultural spheres were manifestations of one and the same phenomenon or reality, and one and the same ideal or principle was the lynch-pin for the change to which we aspired. As far as we were concerned, we were intellectuals *and* writers *and* politicians, all rolled into one. It took time for us to learn to differentiate between ourselves and reality "out there" and to understand that we couldn't do it all: we found that we had to turn inwards, and delve into ourselves to fathom what it was that we really wanted. We did all of this relatively late in life. While I began writing poetry early on, I decided to be a poet, that is, to make poetry my main pursuit, much later. My first published work (the poem "Soor" [Tyre]) was written in 1974 when I was 29 – not the age of a beginner.

I have always written copious amounts of prose, both before and after my "late" decision to commit to poetry. And I practice the art of the prose poem which, as the name suggests, lies at the intersection of prose and poetry, with this kind of poetry drawing its expansiveness and exploratory nature from the realm of prose. In spite of this, I found it neither simple nor easy when I turned my hand to narration as all my art and literary talent had, hitherto, been channeled into poetry, which was *the* realm of my literary experience, research, and practice for the longest time. Though I remained unaware of it, poetry consumed all of my linguistic craft and angst, all of my thinking in the literary universe. And as I examine my attempts at novel-writing, I sense that my poetic habits, sensibility, and practice are resistant to the endeavor, and only adapt to it with difficulty.

Despite the fact that my experience is based on the interplay between prose and poetry, and that a prose poem is as near to prose as it is to poetry, I have now understood that poetry is something *other than*, something that is *not*, prose (even though there are, of course, no absolutes), and that the crafting of poetry and of prose is quite different.

Looking back over my own experience, I notice that in my poetry I try to avoid the *display* of craft and artfulness (this may not be my approach alone but possibly something that holds generally true in poetry). I strive for an elementary and natural quality, consonant with emotion but devoid of obvious laboring, craft or ornamentation. None of this implies simplification, for that can, and usually does, lead to artifice and conceit. Nor does it mean obviousness or artlessness. On the contrary, what it entails is the exertion of an effort to clothe art in naturalness and spontaneity, and to return to some form of elemental utterance (as difficult as this sometimes can be). I am speaking here of poetry as I see it, not about myself or my poetry.

As far as my own poetry is concerned, I would characterize my style as as subdued or restrained, refraining from self-advertisement of any kind, distasteful self-promotion, or blatant effort to excite and incite. It relies on the inner force carried by the words and their power to suggest. Poetry is, *par excellence*, the language of the fundamental and the essential, and thus poetic expression has an

elemental quality. The words have a reach, both proximate and remote, for poetry in its entirety is a symbolic language: flowers, stars, and shoes are not simply such; rather they represent and can say all manner of things beyond their physical existence. The realm of poetry is this connection between the proximate and the remote, and its ability to project a discourse to points near and far at the same time.

All of this is by way of explaining the difficulty that a poet like me encounters in any attempt to write prose or narrative. Novel-writing doesn't benefit from the writer tightly reining in the display of his art and his craft. There is a ready artfulness and deployment of craft in novel-writing which I shied away from, and I found it hard to allow my writing blatant artfulness or to openly exhibit the elements of my craft. Poetry customarily regards such devices as being excessively clever, if not actually pedantic, for therein lie the pitfalls of construction, artifice, and ornamentation. Thus, I found in writing a novel that I had far latitude, a wide-ranging space and a freedom that were uncomfortable – I approached them with great caution and guardedness, even fear. A narrative cannot, like poetry, be reined in, revealing and explaining the barest of essentials. In a novel, subject-matter requires explanation and interpretation, and needs defined endings. A novel is not satisfied only stating the essence or kernel of a topic, for it can contain completely optional subject-matter, as well as passages that are only very minimally artistic. When a novelist sets about describing a large room, for example, or a door, or a wall, or a man (and large parts of the narrative in my novel are taken up with such), every sentence does not have to be a beautifully-crafted and shining gem in the way that poetry does using tension, dialectic, surprise or contradiction. Nor does every sentence have to reveal layers of meaning, be sonorous or encapsulate symbolic content or suggestion. In some narrative descriptions, the novelist may do little more than enumerate, archive, note and record. Thus the novelist accumulates a superabundance of gifts. When I engage in this kind of writing, an awful emptiness takes hold of me because I feel that I am before "lifeless" writing, where I am doing little more than enumerating and aggregating, without engaging my imagination or soul. As if someone else were doing this for me.

My first narrative work, which hasn't been published for the reasons I mentioned earlier, was really more of a biographical project than a novel, but the experience led me to understand that relying solely on one's memory is not feasible. At least for me it isn't, as all that remains in my memory is the "whiff" of an event, its mood and resulting impacts. The details, i.e., the *succession of moments [making up the event]*, are erased, and there is no way to recover them other than by re-creating them, re-inventing them really. In this sense the entire process seems fictitious, and "remembering" become fiction. When I understood that there was no way of simply recording things, it really bothered me, but then I surrendered – and not only did I not attempt to hold my imagination in check, I deliberately sought to take advantage of it and to couple it with the truth. In this way, part of the story became completely invented, as I relied entirely on my imagination for a good half of the novel.

While *Blood Work*, then, is not my first novel, it was, from the start, a different type of project. It was a deliberate attempt to compose a story from something that was a complete unknown. As a child, I had had an uncle, a young emigrant, whom I never knew in person or even saw, but who when he died became a family tragedy that I *lived through* – in the nervous breakdown of my father following his brother's death and in my mother's, almost manic determination, to shield my father from the memory: so that alluding to him or to anything remotely connected to him was strictly forbidden and thus his death was transformed into a family taboo. *Blood Work* is, in essence, a narrative of this

taboo: the story of an unknown uncle, whose death made him more unknowable as it transformed him into a secret. I had nothing to work with but this interdiction and obfuscation, for no one at home would bring up the subject of my uncle other than in a whisper. From this perspective, *Blood Work* was notable, since it was a biographical novel without a biography. It was an analysis of relationships that did not happen. In a sense it was an encounter with nothingness, with the void.

At least, that's how the project started out. When I began writing, I wrestled incessantly with how to lend this nothingness substance, how to make it concrete, how to make it figure in a story. There is no doubt that I had in mind Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children*, when I began. This novel, whose translation appeared in Damascus, made Rushdie known long before the publication, and accompanying furor, of *The Satanic Verses*. I am not sure how the book was received when it first came out in translation, but I am guessing that it was more widely-read than publicized numbers would suggest. I still wonder if this wasn't one of our great literary secrets, i.e., whether the influence of *Midnight's Children* on novel-writing [in the Arabic language] wasn't far greater than it appeared. What I do know, however, that *Midnight's Children* was in my head. The refraining from sorrow over the hero in my novel echoed, if only distantly, some of the characteristics attributed to the children born on the eve of India's independence in Rushdie's novel – and was possibly also an echo of that absence of odor in the protagonist of Patrick Süskind's novel, *Perfume*.

I think I have digressed enough. Those who regard *Blood Work* as more of a narrative text than a novel, embrace this distinction because of the poeticism of the text, which they find noteworthy. But those who regard it as a novel, first and foremost, as opposed to a "textual pleasure," take it to task for its "literariness" and its digressions, and even possibly for its excessive poeticism.

I must admit that when I began *Blood Work*, I had nothing in mind but the blankness that surrounded this dead uncle, nothing beyond his absent presence, as it were. I didn't do any preliminary planning, didn't make any notes, and had no prior knowledge of the events described in the novel. I couldn't say what fascinated me about a subject that, in my life, drew a complete blank – and was close to an absolute unknown. Was it some kind of accounting with myself? Was this blankness in some way the counterpart of a childhood and family situation that were, subconsciously, featureless? As if my childhood had not taken place and my family did not exist, as if they had no memory or life? I began writing, unencumbered by what would become a thickly-layered story swarming with characters, events and reversals. As I sat down to write, there was before me nothing but this uncle, the news and impact of whose death was all that I knew. But saying that I was writing from "nothingness" is really just poetic license, as my novel brimmed with ideas. I remembered a bronzed young woman who visited us when I was little and later found out was my uncle's fiancée, or soon-to-be betrothed. I clung to this memory, but in order to turn it into a story, I had to delve into a setback from my own life: briefly, a Moroccan woman married to an unsuccessful illustrator in my city had made a move on me when I was a young man, but my limited experience at that age led to nothing coming of this. Conflating the fiancée's story with my own, it wasn't long before the tale took on a life of its own from elements I had created out of sheer fantasy. Thus, the young woman that appears in the novel has a father, an amazing palace, an unrequited love story with the uncle, and finally a love story with the nephew-narrator which, after an initial faltering, is successful.

From my father, I had learnt that my uncle was exceptionally gifted with his hands, and I used this to create a sequence of interconnected events and facts which, though based in fantasy, included characters borrowed from people I had met in other circumstances. It seemed to me as I wrote that at every turn I had to invent, and that my story was not only different but even strange and

exceptional. I was charmed by my ability to invent and to layer my story thickly. If poetry lies in the power of associated images, this power was transferred into the novel's seemingly inexhaustible succession of stories. Thus, the novel became a necklace of stories engendering one another ceaselessly and seamlessly. With this almost magical generation of stories, was I, however remotely, perhaps inspired by Salman Rushdie's novel, *Midnight's Children*, which, itself, I believe, drew inspiration from *The Thousand and One Nights*? For stories which emanate unendingly from other stories are the foundation of that classic work.

I wrote *Blood Work* in a state of "linguistic thrall," if I may call it so, where, to my own greatest surprise, phrases and expressions blossomed and flowed ahead of my imagination, and I found this so seductive as to have to struggle against it. I wasn't striving for poetic composition, the language I used was neither nebulous nor ambiguous, and I avoided any kind of verbal associations that were not inherent to the unfolding of the story or factually relevant. I used precise, conventional, story-telling language, which nevertheless was full, rounded and striking – it was dense with poetic tension despite the absence of any kind of poetic cadence or composition.

I had meant to write a novel about an unknown uncle and, without any intention on my part, this figure became the entry-point into a world that had remained, for sub-conscious reasons, largely unknown: the world of my family – me and my brother, my father and my mother. My dead uncle fused with my brother, who died in childhood, and I fused with my father, and even though it was unintentional the novel ended up being like something that would normally take place on a psychoanalyst's couch – summoning forth unresolved relationships that, to all intents and purposes, were unknown as they remained buried in my sub-conscious. From this point of view, there is no doubt that the novel was akin to a confession, like some sort of self-administered psychoanalysis.

There was much jealousy between me and my younger brother who died in childhood. I was the brilliant but spoiled first-born, and my brother was the disappointing son who was excluded from motherly love and the esteem of the family. It wasn't until I was deep into the novel that I realized I was rewriting the story of my family from the standpoint of my brother who, like my uncle, was story-less. My feelings of superiority as a child had made him invisible to me. He was, like my uncle, without a place or position in the family, and writing the novel was undoubtedly an attempt at granting him both; it also enabled me to discover my own place and position *vis-à-vis* this deceased brother and thus find the lost and misplaced narrative of the family. Only then did I understand my fascination with the story of the unknown uncle. He represented all that we were: as long as the deceased brother remained unknown, all of us lacked identity and were lost, and it was only after he was returned to his place that we could emerge from our anonymity and recover our story and our being.

Was I driven to writing as a form of psychotherapy? Was I unwittingly trying to uncover the locus of my own existence? Is it me who was the unknown, and my uncle only the key I had borrowed to step into my own life?

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