

The Styles of Language

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It is my belief that a poet is a writer of a text in which he attempts, with some adornment, to declare the “truth” and the historical moment as well as all its “ins” and “outs”. Because of this belief, I constantly try to write poems that say “my identity” and my “milieu”; by milieu I mean the political-social instant, an instant of human anxiety and worry. The writer is concerned with the question of “the human condition.” Thus, for the poem not to become a sermon or a message or a moral attitude (or all of these), and for it to incline towards art in the first place, I endeavor, while composing it, to catch the “signs of the daily,” to catch the styles of language which proliferate in the space of the city I inhabit.

My sources are the newspapers, the clichés repeated by people, the flood of pictures, the commonplaces of social semiotics floating around, new ideas (whether in the theatre or in a taxi driver’s head), the stock market news, crime news, scandals, bureaucratic problems...All of these I try to “translate” into a semiotic order that seems realistic and injected directly into the text, i.e. without being over-crafted. This is a kind of deception I use, if we agree that literature is a kind of deception. In other words it is “organized chaos.”

I forgot who said: “Woe to them, those forefathers, they said everything.”

Apparently, this is true. However, in writing there are always two motives and it is a mistake to think that they are contradictory, or that one of them cancels the other. It is very important, though, to arrange them in the right way: first we must talk about “how” to write, and then we can talk about “what” to write.

That is why I don’t seek what has not been said. I do, however, seek a new “trick” to say what I will be saying (and which could be old, used or recent).

I would, for example, be sitting in a café and overhear a girl, looking cheap and sounding vulgar, repeating like a broken machine the phrase: “life almost, life almost.” That phrase was scattered in the course of her breathless blabbering and I picked it up while thinking, at the same moment, about the assassination scene of a member of the parliament and the speeches of a Hezbollah leader, and about some scenes of my childhood.

At that particular moment, I remembered too, how a fortune teller grabbed my hand, to tell my future, when I was seven years old. So I wrote: “A fortune teller is holding my hand and saying: ‘life almost, life almost’”.

In the fortune teller scene, I discovered all the obscurantism and thus ignorance that rules our personal and general history (magic, charlatanism, secrets, conspiracies...), the assassination of a deputy, a religious leader’s dominance, the idiocy of a modern girl and my poor and war-stricken childhood. I did not find anything to explain it all by except the fortune teller’s idea. (I’m talking here about a poem I wrote that has not been published yet.)

To submit to the requirements of poetry (i.e. the inclination for “composition” rather than “analysis”) I had to move directly to another aspect of composition. That drew me to write something about my childhood. It was then that whatever memories that were still in my head started flooding. So I chose the following scene: I am in the car with my mother, brother, sister and our neighbor, accompanying, by ourselves, the coffin that contains my father’s body. We are

stopped at a militia checkpoint. The men are wearing masks. I think they are the ones that killed my father. So I decided that this would be the scene that will follow that of the fortune teller. I write:

With trembling knees,
I remember an hour left over,
From a childhood that ended at a masked men's road block
In a car carrying a coffin
And driven by a stranger, with a widowed whore sitting beside him, crying and getting excited.

In the last line, I spontaneously exposed my personal opinion of my mother and with unjustified shamelessness, other than my preference for the "attraction" of literature. Here I say: If one is shy, one should not be a writer. Writing is "scandalous."

In any case, going back to the context, memory probably works on its own, because at that precise moment and without any specific reason, I remembered a hiking trip in the mountains from some time ago. Lovely nature, exquisite sights, a wonderful time etc... In compliance with the workings of memory, in the poem I skipped to the scenery of the trip. I guess poetry allows you the freedom of jumping in time and place. I suppose you cannot do that in a novel.

Before writing (i.e. in the process of getting started), I avoid reading poetry. Acting like a thief, I go to art exhibits or to the cinema or I read novels. I am struck with a kind of dizziness or rather confusion so that as I listen to the news I pick up phrases and lift them out of context. The noise of those phrases reverberating in my ears and hovering in my head makes me realize that I'm ready to write. For example, a commercial about men's shirts inspires a poetic line. Because of my inclination toward biographies, my memory begins working excitedly and I start obsessing over the need to forget the memories of all my poetry readings in order to write without being contaminated by the memory of readings, which usually deceives writers and dictates to them what has already been written throughout the history of writing.

By deception I mean that the unconscious which stores the effects of our readings also dictates parities that are comforting and reassuring. That is when the writer slips into what is common and unanimous (or even re-used and ready). That is the limitation of using jargon in literature.

The dilemma is thus to respond to the requirements of poetry and to trick them at the same time. I must respond to the history of poets' accomplishments and at the same time and moment forget it. We decide to become writers because we greatly admire and esteem all that was written before. We are the descendants of the legendary library, although, and this is the most important issue, we are not satisfied with everything that was written.

Dissatisfaction gives us then the legitimacy to write a new line, to be added to that "library."

And even when we reach the difficult balance between composition and "consciousness of literature," a more difficult problem yet faces us: the relationship with the hypothetical reader.

It is this relationship that makes or breaks our writing. First we invent the hypothetical reader, and then we spend our entire lives trying to satisfy this creature of our own invention.

The prerequisite of a successful literary composition is for its reader to be a creature resembling a reasonable proportion of the population while at the same time agreeing with the standards of the modern cultural elite. In that sense, the text itself must be saturated with domesticity while still related to the constant changing of the world. To take an example, I can no longer be partial, in a negative sense, to a homosexual, and no one else can, for that matter. That will cause our immediate exit from cultural tolerance. However, literature is not a "law," as it can also show itself to be sadistic or contradictory to "cultural tolerance."

Here the separation between the requirements of literature and the demands of social propriety begins. If I were to write "I slapped a woman" I would immediately think that the hypothetical reader will morally convict me. So I write, "I slept with a woman" and the reader would say instead "Oh! That's a humorous exhibition of masculinity," no, even an unnatural melodrama. I might also say "I cut open a woman" or "I splashed a woman" ... or "I became a woman." Ambiguity is the key to literature.

The eternal dilemma is: What about the language? This is the problem. What seduces me is removing every expression from its conventional meaning without betraying it completely; pushing the phrase out of context. This is not done in vain but for the purpose of widening the imagination, developing better communication between people and elevating the "common" language, to light up the thoughts. An example is the Rahbani operetta theater. The village square, the fountain, the mill, the threshing ground, the hunter, the mountain, the doorstep, the stranger, a certain bird etc....Mere names, creatures or ordinary things that have become associated with an unreal, legendary and dreamy perspective... Whenever the Lebanese or the Arabs hear a Rahbani song, they sense what we could call a poetic delusion, meaning the shifting of the relationship between the referent and what is referred to, to a new interpretation. Another example is the influence of the "July poets" on the language of repressive regimes of the Arab world, from the Fifties on and until today, i.e. the harmony between the ideology of national rebirth and the hallucinatory, preaching, rousing, resurrecting style of the "July" poets.

The last example makes me leap to politics. No literature exists in the absence of political awareness. That's impossible. Any kind of art is a stand *vis-a-vis* the universal.

The human condition is what gives any text its literary value. I believe that politics is the most practical invention of literature. It was from the art of public speaking (i.e., rhetoric), practiced by Greek and Roman philosophers, that the art of politics originated.

Back to poetry, I confess: Every time I try to compose a poem, my stomach starts hurting. I also confess that I'm bored with reading poetry, and physically in pain when I write it. It is basically a kind of addiction where the climax comes at the last moment and not during writing.

Why is the "I" present in all my poems?

The "I" in Arabic poetry can be instantly summarized in the personality of the poet Al Mutanabbi. It is a prophetic, haughty and marvelous "I" perfected once and for all. This applies to the first poet ever known by the Arabs and the last poet of the modern movement. On the other hand, I suppose my "I" is individual and civil, ridden with wrongs and sins, regrets, anxieties and deprivations, doubts, weakness, hesitation, personal lowly needs. "I" does not go beyond the individual frail body, stuck between millions of "identities" inhabiting cities, small and crowded, burdened by time,

memories, competition and a short life. I think that the "immortal personality" belongs to museums. Then the "I"; mine, is devoid of trust or contentment. In short, it is the "I" of the "counter hero."

The moment I decided to become a poet, I also decided not to study literature. I realized there were two kinds of people with regard to literature: Those who study it and "understand" it and those who do not understand it but still write it. That is why I studied philosophy in order not to understand literature.

The problem with any poet is not in composing a "nice" phrase; it is in finding his direction, the voice that will express the moment. There are at least a thousand Arab poets who know perfectly well how to write a poem and the requirements of poetry, but nevertheless, their texts prove to be an example of redundancy.

I believe that the reason is not in the similarity of their voices, such as the critics say, but in the lack of direction, project and proposal.

My early poems, which were not published in any collection of poems, and which I threw away without regret, answered to experimental poetry and to the given and accepted poetic suggestions and demands. They lacked direction and project. It took me a long time to realize for example that the poems of the Forties, Fifties and early Sixties made a case for renaissance and resurrection. It strengthened the connection between traditions, ancient mythologies, past legends and modernism, language revival, society, values, morals, modernization in religion and the belief in continuous progress. All that was accomplished by unrivaled poets, each in his own style, one with an Anglo-Saxon tone similar to Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, another a francophone or traditional or a reconciliatory tone between original and new etc....

Then came the generation of the 1967 [Arab-Israeli war] defeat, with its leftist revolutionary tone and with an immense amount of anger, despair and the call for revolution. That call was made in a singing and somewhat naïve tone. Later all was wiped out by the inferno of collapsing societies, civil wars, victory of repression and the tyranny of military and militia rule as well as the failure of coups.

As we accumulated this historical awareness, we realized that poetry is not only writing "fine" sentences. It is finding a direction and a mission to express, in language and thoughts, this historical "panting."

To accomplish this task as an individual is harder; to find the individual tone and rhythm and idea that, at the same time, reflect the public direction. It is that fact which made me put down in verse my autobiography of wartime, which entails an awareness and an indictment of the events and a linguistic reality as well. The language of resurrection and then that of revolutionary lyrics have ended in fragments inherited by myself and my generation and thus we took action.

We received fragments of language, ideas and meanings from the generation of the Seventies. We can no longer write a poem that says: "The most beautiful mother is the one whose son came back as a martyr" (taken from a poem by Hassan Abdalla and sung by Marcel Khalifeh) Even Mahmoud Darwish finally gave in and started writing:

"This rhyme was not necessary either to set the tune or to lessen the pain,
It is just an addition, like flies on the table" (from *State of Siege* (2002))

That is a quick elegy to a whole poetical era.

When I went to Africa during the war in late 1968, I carried with me several poetry books composed by many famous Arab poets. Becoming a poet was one of my options then.

In less than a year, I wrote seven poems inspired by Africa and one by my war experience in Lebanon. When I returned to Beirut one year later, one of the most reputable magazines published three of them simultaneously.

That encouraged me to become a writer, poet and journalist. I joined college to study philosophy and become “educated” or so I thought then.

Following several failed attempts at composing experiential, reflective, haughty, mental, intellectual and philosophical poems, I realized that I was “escaping” from what I loved to write about most: my own war experience. I was deluded in thinking that I wanted to go with the tide in literature and satisfy the literary “connoisseurs.”

Between 1988 and 1989, I wrote my own experience during the war in verse. I discovered then that it was time to (culturally and literarily) contradict the Arab nationalist leftist, radical, provocative, stimulating and lyrical lines that prevailed in the Seventies and that encouraged fighting, martyrdom and glorified heroism. It was time too to contradict aesthetics that were fake, sweet, elegant, unreal and untrue to history; experimental aesthetics that imitated Western fashions, particularly the French fashion that ruled over the pre-war Lebanese literary connoisseurs.

I noticed that the war verses that we the young poets wrote not only spoke about the battles—to differ from other common subjects at that time—but were written in a broken, damaged and straightforward style in a language that was far from “balanced.”

That happened without prior planning and when we realized the value of this characteristic, we defended it.

Suddenly, the term “war poetry” appeared.

In 1989, my first book of poetry won Youssef Al-Khal’s prize for the best collection of poems in the Arab world. That prize was given exclusively to the first unpublished book of a young poet. My colleague, Yehya Jaber, who wrote a war biography similar to mine, had won the same prize in 1988.

The novelist Elias Khoury wrote an article explaining why two young Lebanese men won that prize in two consecutive years. He said that there existed a new generation born from the womb of war who had something to say in literature (and ideas).

That brings us back to the subject of direction and the writer’s knowledge of the world and culture. Beirut was once more an experiment: what happens in it and what reaches it from East and West.

During that epoch, the Iran-Iraq war coming to an end. We found out that the Iraqi youth who spent 8 years in the ditches and suffered massacres that took away the lives of hundreds of thousands of them had drowned Iraqi poetry deep in the mud. Voices similar to ours started reaching us from Iraq but with an Iraqi accent. That’s when we discovered that the direction we chose and the resulting language that we shamelessly used was similar to a certain extent to that used by the same generation in Iraq. However, the Iraqi experience was not continued. I think the reason

was the existing difference between dictatorship and democracy and also the fact that we are unburdened by traditions, unlike the Iraqi strict literary traditions.

That stimulated me to publish four poetry books with the basic theme being my life during the war years.

However, poetry imposed its requirements again and seemed to get “sick” of my “stories.” I had to discover a new direction and tone of my own. It was time to finish “narrating” the war in verse.

Was the war “a trauma” for me? Maybe so. It was a mixture of madness, carelessness, fun and fear. It was for me the “obvious” life. I used to recount what happened to me for the sake of amusement, showing off or anger with those who I felt did not understand what happened. I wrote about those events because after all, they were “privileged” experiments and experiences.

Between 2000 and 2005, I noticed that culture in Beirut was rapidly and dramatically changing. New arts dominated everything else: installation, video clips, graffiti, performance, video art, performance shows, hip hop, chatting etc...

This prevalent culture came along with a mainstream ideology that said: Let’s forget the war, we do not want to think of the past, let’s forgive what happened, let’s turn the page of history, etc. The culture of denial and forgetting 15 years of war was a culture without memory, i.e. a stupid culture that might generate another war in the future.

That new generation of culture was also characterized by its fragile connection with the Arabic tongue: It is a culture that almost never reads.

That is the reason for my steering away from poetry. I got involved, purposefully, with the society called “Forms & Colors” which organized the most important annual modern art exhibition in Beirut and attracted a youthful crowd. I decided to compose a narrative book in prose and write it all in one month. It was issued as a part of the “displays” of the festival under the title *Yasser Arafat Looked at Me and Smiled*.

I intended to write in a non-literary language, contrary to literary requirements, because my writing was directed to the youth as a testimony from my generation to theirs.

This was also an excuse to practice a style other than verse. That alone, I believe, gives me the opportunity to “grab” poetry itself. I challenged myself to write a short book that ends before the reader gets bored with it. I imagined it as an illustrated storybook but without cartoons, or a movie with the breakdown or decoupage of a video clip. I had to try my hand at all the styles of modern arts; to “converse” or “compete” with what has been achieved until now.

I do not know if I was right in doing so, but I do know that it is exactly that which gives writing its most wonderful characteristics: Adventure, play and stomachache.

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