

towards a foreign likeness bent

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Jalal Toufic

An Interview By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

— Is it possible to pinpoint your exact motivation for writing *(Vampires)*? Did it stem from any one particular idea, incident, film, etc.?

— Now, so many years later, I remember only vaguely some of the reasons for starting to write *(Vampires)*. I think that what attracted me to the figure of the vampire at a time when I was finishing *Distracted* was that when he is in a place he is simultaneously not in it, that is, that he is as it were ontologically distracted, as is shown by his failure to appear in the mirror at the same location; that he is an aristocrat; and, given my dislike of sitting, that when he exceptionally sits he still seems to be standing since the height of the dining room chairs in the vampire's castle is that of a standing man (Murnau's *Nosferatu*). But as usually happens, one embarks on ventures for the wrong reasons or for secondary ones—especially during one's youth. Thus Christopher Columbus sailed west across the Atlantic Ocean in search of a route to Asia, but landed instead on and thus discovered America, whose existence he did not suspect. And thus *Casablanca's* Rick says that he moved to Casablanca for health reasons: "I came to Casablanca for the waters." "The waters? What waters? We're in the desert." "I was misinformed."

— How long did the book take to write?

— From the perspective of my various landlords, *(Vampires)* took about two years to write. But certainly the issue is more complicated, since to write this kind of book one has to have at least once underwent non-linear time, whether labyrinthine or cyclical, feeling while in a certain location that one has always been in it; one has at least once to have seen people frozen by a diegetic silence-over; one has at least once to have experienced "a day the measure of which is a thousand years of what you count" (Qur'ân 32:5) or "a Day whereof the span is fifty thousand years" (Qur'ân 70:4).

— Critical responses to your work vary widely, so I was wondering: do you read reviews of your own work, do they affect you, are you as suspicious of someone praising your work ("There is, in my opinion, no more subtle or powerful thinker today than Jalal Toufic") as you would be of someone slamming it ("This is the most incomprehensible book I've read in years")?

— I am not at all suspicious but honored that the poet Lyn Hejinian wrote the first line, which appears on the jacket of my book *Undying Love, or Love Dies*. Without your characterization of the second commentator's words as "slamming" my book, which I assume you concluded from the context of the quote, I would have been unable to discern whether his or her comment is a compliment or not. Moreover, I am unable to gauge what the one who wrote these words means by the term "incomprehensible"; for example, does he or she understand it in the manner I do in the second edition of *Distracted*: "Lebanese filmmakers and more so videomakers should not make films or videos to try to understand and make understandable what happened during the war years. While social scientists, whether sociologists, economists, etc., can provide us with more or less convincing reasons, and mystifiers can grossly nonplus us, valid literature and art provide us with intelligent and subtle incomprehension. One of the main troubles with the world is that, unlike art and literature, it allows only for the gross alternative: understanding/incomprehension. Contrariwise, art and literature do not provide us with the illusion of comprehending, of grasping, but allow us to keenly not understand, intimating to us that the alternative is not between comprehension and incomprehension but between incomprehension in a gross manner and while expecting comprehension; and incomprehension in an intelligent and subtle manner..."? I find what most others deem most comprehensible, newspapers, incomprehensible in an ineluctably dull manner; it is easier for me to read thinkers, writers or poets such as Jacques Lacan, Gertrude Stein, the James Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, and Paul Celan than newspapers.

— Aside from obviously Nietzsche and Deleuze, what other writers do you enjoy, are you influenced by, stylistically? Are there any novelists whom you particularly admire, in terms of narrative structure, style, etc.?

— While I rarely read novels, I admire the novelists William Burroughs and Alain Robbe-Grillet generally, as well as specific novels and shorter fictional texts by other writers, for example: Kathy Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*, J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, Samuel Beckett's *Worstward Ho*, Thomas Bernhard's *The Loser*, Maurice Blanchot's *Death Sentence* and *The Madness of the Day*, Marguerite Duras' *The Malady of Death*, Richard Foreman's *No-Body: A Novel in Parts*, Pierre Klossowski's *The Baphomet*, Doug Rice's *Blood of Mugwump*, Sartre's *Nausea*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. I do not believe that any writer is influenced by any other at the level of style—at least I am not. On the other hand, I believe writers collaborate with each other and with artists and filmmakers and video makers in an untimely manner—at least I do.

— Who do you write for—yourself, a particular audience?

— I write for myself as one of the readers of my work; were it otherwise my writing, including my responses in this interview, would not be a dialogue (as *Distracted's* epigraph puts it: "Are you saying this to me?" "Also to myself. One should speak solely when also speaking to oneself. Only then is there a dialogue"). I also write for and to my amnesiac version in an altered realm of consciousness that he found himself in after a lapse of consciousness and that I found myself out of after a lapse of consciousness: he needs my help to achieve a modicum of detachment from the stream of thoughts linking in his head on their own; from compulsions; from the insinuating voices-over that assail him; and from hallucinations. I also write to my untimely collaborators, and to the forgetful grateful reader, i.e. the generous reader.

— What are your feelings on the academic/intellectual community in Beirut now? Do you feel that your work is supported here or is it better appreciated abroad, and if so, does this bother you?

— For the first couple of months following my return to Lebanon in 1999, after spending fifteen years in the USA, I met a number of people who instead of asking me, who had taught at California Institute of the Arts, one of the main American art institutes, about the contemporary art practices and critical theories in the USA in general and California in specific, began themselves to talk to me profusely about the American art scene! I believe that were someone to return, like Lazarus, from death, they would not care to ask him about that condition and/or realm, but would start telling him about it! Would they be thus “giving voice to the voiceless”? In his opening remarks for the exhibition *DisORIENTATION* at the House of World Cultures in Berlin, on 20 May 2003, Lebanese novelist and journalist (!)¹ Elias Khoury talked about “the role of culture as a critical approach and as the voice of the voiceless.” If we include in culture neither art nor writing, then yes, culture—and democracy²—gives voice to the voiceless (the Lebanese newspaper *as-Safir*’s motto is: “the voice of the voiceless”). But art and writing (and real emancipatory politics) do not give voice to the voiceless;³ rather, they interrupt even the inner voice of the “voiceless,” whether by suspending the interior monologue of the reader or spectator (or advocate of a political movement), or by trying, often unsuccessfully, to silence the voices-over that forcibly impose themselves in the mind of the one who, whether schizophrenic or dead, has become voiceless, anxiously wanting to scream but unable to do so. It is the exceptional merit of Beckett’s writing to suspend the interior monologue of the reader even as he or she reads that the voice—even more than life!—goes on: *Worstward Ho* begins with, “On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said Nohow on....”; continues with, “Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by

¹ In the Arab world, one repeatedly encounters the even more incongruous combination in the same person: poet and journalist.

The difference between Khoury the writer and Khoury the journalist (he is the editor of the cultural supplement of the newspaper *an-Nahâr*, where he contributes a weekly page) does not correspond exactly to the difference between his novels and his journalism, since he is often a journalist in his novels, while he is sometimes a writer in his journalism.

² Fittingly, in Arabic *sawt*, whose primary sense is “a voice,” means also “a vote.”

³ At one point toward the end of my video *The Sleep of Reason: This Blood Spilled in My Veins*, 2002, I was not vigilant enough against being the voice of the “voiceless”: if the quote of the first few lines from Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* (“Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels’ / hierarchies? and even if one of them pressed me / suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed / in that overwhelming existence”) belongs to culture, it is not because it would instance erudition, but because it appears to be an attempt to give voice to a cow that is on the point of being slaughtered (is the cow really voiceless? “The seven heavens and the earth and all that is therein praise Him, and there is not a thing but hymneth His praise; but ye understand not their praise.” [Qur’ân 17:44]). Nonetheless, I hope that in front of the previous cow being slaughtered, my video induced a suspension of the interior monologue and thus a kind of prayer. Prayer is not some discourse of supplication, but the suspension of the interior monologue, so that it is God Who talks and does things: “I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks.” One of the most beautiful prayers in Islam is Hallaj’s *Anâ al-Haqq* (I am the Real [i.e. God]). Prayer is addressed to God, but by God.

naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say that best worse. With leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worst. Unlessenable least best worse”; and ends with, “Said Nohow on.” If culture attempts to give voice to the voiceless, it is, unfortunately, partly to try to hide the infinity of what can have less voice but never no voice: “Least never to be naught.” As in the case of *weightless*—“having little or no weight” (*American Heritage Talking Dictionary*); “having little weight: lacking apparent gravitational pull” (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*); “having or appearing to have no weight” (*Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*)—and notwithstanding the dictionaries, we should not understand the suffix *-less* in *voiceless* and *motionless* to basically mean “without; lacking” (*American Heritage Dictionary*); we should rather take *voiceless* to refer basically to someone who has less voice but never no voice, and *motionless* to basically refer to a worldly living human, animal or object that can have less motion but never a *dead stop*, the kind of unworldly freezing that the dead, the schizophrenic and the dancer’s subtle body may undergo in the altered states and realms of dance and death. For an example of the resentful nightmare that is Khoury’s idea of giving “voice to the voiceless,” one can read his novel *The Sun’s Gate*, 1998, in which a male nurse keeps trying to remind an older friend of his who is in a coma of sundry incidents that happened to him. How fitting that Khoury came up with this monologist situation given how bad a listener he is—isn’t it the case that virtually all those who want to give voice to the “voiceless” are bad listeners? Symptomatically, his vacuous male nurse does not give voice to the voiceless once the latter dies. Where Khoury leaves, the Tibetan Buddhist lama starts; indeed, the situation envisioned by Khoury is a travesty of the following situation in Tibetan Buddhism: the lama reciting the *Bardo Thödol* (literally *Liberation through Hearing in the In-Between State*) by the side of the corpse.

In my book *Over-Sensitivity*, 1996, which I wrote in San Francisco, I constructed the concept of withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster. In my next book, *Forthcoming*, 2000, which I wrote in Los Angeles and whose manuscript I sent to the publisher just before leaving to Lebanon in October 1999, I elaborated this concept, imagining at one point a Lebanese photographer “who had become used to viewing things at the speed of war. So for a while after the ‘civil’-war’s end, he did not take any photographs nor shoot any videos, waiting until he learned to look again at a leisurely pace. This period of adjustment lasted a full two years. Yet even after he became used to looking at buildings and experiencing events at the rhythm of peace, the photographs of the ruins in Lebanon taken by this Lebanese photographer, who classically composed those of his photographs shot in other countries, still looked like they were taken by a photographer lacking time to aim since in imminent danger, the compositions haphazard and the focus almost always off. . . . in his work the out-of-focus and/or the haphazard framings were not a formal strategy but due to the withdrawal and thus unavailability to vision of the material.” Unbeknownst to me, at the same period, the Lebanese artists Joana Hajji Thomas and Khalil Joreige, who were living then between Paris and Beirut, did an installation titled *Wonder Beirut*, at Janine Rbayz Gallery in Beirut in 1999, that revolves around the work of a photographer who “no longer develops his photographs. It is enough for him to take them. At the end of the exhibition, 6452 rolls of film were laid on the floor: rolls containing photos taken by the photographer but left undeveloped” (from Hajji Thomas and Joreige’s text “*Tayyib rah farjik shighli*” [“OK, I’ll Show You My Work”], *Al-Âdâb*, January-February 2001). This concordance between two anomalous fictional photographers conceived by a writer and two artists who did not know each

other reveals a community between strangers, as well as confirms these two fictional photographers and their kind of problematic photography as symptoms of the society in question. From this perspective, and unlike Egypt, in which the vast majority of artists and writers reside in their country and never emigrated for extended periods, Lebanon, which due to the long civil war and the invasions it suffered as well as for other reasons has a significant number of artists and writers abroad, is a privileged site for thinking the community in general and the artistic and literary community in specific, for the latter is formed basically not through its members' exposure to and consequent discussion of each other's works (which produces fashions) but through this concordance around anomalous subjects, figures, spaces and architectures, etc., by artists, thinkers, writers, and film and video makers who do not know each other, revealing these anomalies as symptoms of the culture with which they are dealing. Now that Joana Hajji Thomas, Khalil Joreige, myself and a few others are together in Beirut and we know each other, I am much more interested in what singular universe each one of these video makers and artists are developing, rather than in the affinities and resonance between our works, so that our community now that we know each other and each other's works is one of support for the construction by each of his or her (or their—in the case of Hajji Thomas and Joreige—) own universe.

"A people is a detour of nature to get to six or seven great men. —Yes, and then to get around them." (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, "Aphorisms and Interludes" no. 126). If the qualification is to be viewed positively, one can interpret it as implying: "... in order to get to six or seven additional great men, again and again." Unfortunately Arabs are in such a dire condition that I am apprehensive that the affirmative reading of the qualification in Nietzsche's aphorism may no longer hold in their case. Should a great Arab man or woman be satisfied with this? No, since another implication of Nietzsche's aphorism is that nature cannot get to six or seven new great men or women through the "six or seven" great men already present. Within the context of Arabic culture, this is an additional source of solitude for any great Arab man or woman: for as long as the state of Arabs is this dire, the future great man or woman who may pick up the arrow any great Arab man or woman has sent⁴ will of necessity not be an Arab but someone from another people.

Given the retarded state of the "contemporary" Arab world, I am far better appreciated abroad since the vast majority of those who are contemporaneous with the present live there. The vast majority of those who are not contemporaneous with the time in which they historically live, but lag behind it, believe that were they to travel to the past, they can take advantage there of their knowledge of the future from which they come. Had I still any illusion that such people would read me, I would advise them to consider the case of the philosopher of the untimely, the untimely philosopher Nietzsche, the author of among other books *Untimely Meditations*, who,

⁴ Gilles Deleuze: "In Nietzsche, there is the great opposition between Christ and Saint Paul... [D.H.] Lawrence takes up the opposition once again, but this time he opposes Christ to the red John of Patmos, the author of the Apocalypse.... It is not that Lawrence simply imitates Nietzsche. Rather, he picks up an arrow, Nietzsche's arrow, and shoots it elsewhere, aims it in a different direction... to another audience: 'Nature propels the philosopher into mankind like an arrow; it takes no aim, but hopes the arrow will stick somewhere' [Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Untimely Meditations*], *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 37.

viewing things from the perspective of the future (“What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: the advent of nihilism”),⁵ was ill-adapted to and alienated from the time in which he ostensibly lived: “—Ultimately, no one can extract from things, books included, more than he already knows.... Now let us imagine an extreme case: that a book speaks of nothing but events which lie outside the possibility of general or even of rare experience... In this case simply nothing will be heard, with the acoustical illusion that where nothing is heard there *is* nothing” (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*).

Postscript: while I am reluctant to give and conduct interviews (this is the second one I give; in addition I have myself once interviewed a filmmaker), the people I am essentially interested in interviewing are Sûfî masters who have already died physically, as well as al-Khadir, whose encounter with Moses in Qur’ân 18:65-82 is one of the most beautiful interviews.⁶ While in life I can reach the interviewee even if I am not of the philosophical and/or artistic level to really benefit from the interview, and even without needing the interview to clarify for myself some specific characteristics of the universe he or she has constructed and with which I feel an affinity, this cannot be the case when the interviewee is “dead,” paradigmatically a Sûfî (or Zen...) master: one will have the privilege of meeting him or her in the Imaginal World (*‘alam al-khayâl* aka *‘alam al-mithâl*) only if one is of a spiritual level to benefit from the interview.

⁵ From an entry in the projected preface, dated November 1887-March 1888, to *The Will to Power*. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 3.

⁶ Ibn ‘Arabî: “... The shadow of a person appeared to me.... I rose from my bed and headed towards him... I stared at him and recognized Abû ‘Abd al-Rahmân al-Sulamî, whose spirit had incarnated and whom God had sent to me out of mercy for me. ‘... If he [Moses] had been patient, he would have seen. As it happened, he was preparing to ask al-Khadir a million questions. All concerned facts that had happened to him and that he reproved when coming from al-Khadir.” (Ibn ‘Arabî, *Les Illuminations de la Mecque*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz [Paris: Albin Michel, 1997], pp. 157-158). Cf. Michel Chodkiewicz: “The three acts that Moses reproaches al-Khadir: the boring of a hole in the ship, the slaying of the lad, and the failure to demand payment in exchange of a service correspond to three episodes of the life of Moses that do not conform externally to the norm: the crossing of the Red Sea, the slaying of an Egyptian and the watering of the herd of the girls of Shu’ayb (Jéthro). Therefore al-Khadir does nothing but return to Moses his own image, but Moses judges al-Khadir and therefore himself according to his own state, which is the introduction of the law,” *Ibid.*, p. 311 (my translation). Hence the encounter of Moses and al-Khadir provides a felicitous example of what Lacan tells “us” in his “Seminar on [Poe’s] ‘The Purloined Letter’”: “The sender, we tell you, receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form.”