

Anton Shammas  
Returning to Beirut

I'd like to preface the following remarks with a very lengthy quote from a personal letter sent to me more than ten years ago by Ahmad Beydoun. I ask for your indulgence as I do that, and apologize to the writer for breaching his confidence and dragging the personal tone of his letter into the public domain. At the same time, however, I hope that this act of betrayal could be somehow mitigated by the fact that the nature of the letter asks for and tolerates sharing, first; and, second - that the letter grants me a deferral of sorts, until I catch my breath, being the native of the village of Fassouta, the subject of the letter, who is intimidated by his first visit to Beirut in order to reminisce about the city in its own language.

Beirut, May 22, 1993  
Dear Antoun,

My childhood, in some respects, was a world of legend and that world had two boundaries: Fassouta and Tallouza. The latter was a measure of distance. A Bent Jbayli, if he was asked: "Where are you going?" or "Where are you coming from?" and he wanted to answer with the utmost anger, he would say: "To Tallouza!" or "From Tallouza!" And that was an equivalent to what we would nowadays say: "To Hell!" or "From Hell!" In other words, going to Tallouza, and coming back from Tallouza, assumed a passage through the whole of life itself, and through the world from end to end. But the person giving the answer most probably meant that he was coming from (or going to) a very close by place known to all and sundry, so much so that inquiring about it was nothing but pointless and redundant.

... As for Fassouta, it was a measure of size. Someone would ask: "Why, are you from Fassouta?" or "You think you're from Fassouta?" And the intention behind the question would be that while you are from the smallest village on earth you behave as if you were from *Nayerk* [i.e., New York]. Some of us used this last name to refer to both Americas, Tutrayt [Detroit], Bani Saris [Buenos Aires] and all. So Fassouta was a proper name for the two measures of size, the maximum as well as the minimum, and not only for the latter. It reminded one of the frog that wanted to become an elephant. And no one bothered to explain to me, those days, why Fassouta had been afflicted by the Almighty with such a disposition. For my fellow villagers accepted the will of the Creator, in general, such as it was, and seldom would any of them venture to probe the depths of divine wisdom.

I spent my childhood, then, uncertain about the existence of Tallouza or Fassouta. And until this very day, having reached my 'fifties, I haven't met a single person from Fassouta nor from Tallouza. And this, according to what's been left of the logic of that world of legend that my childhood was, is quite an ordinary thing. For how could a person from Tallouza cross all these continents and spheres, that separate Tallouza from Bent Jbayl, for me to see him? And how could Fassouta be enough space for the birth and raising of a person if it's so tiny and small? And I still do not know why did the Jbaylis choose Fassouta and Tallouza in order to assign them to represent boundaries, and to stand guard over the edge of the universe...

... I have to admit to you that my position vis-à-vis boundaries and edges went through a change many years ago. A friend of mine told me once that a Shaykh from Jabal Aamel went to Iran to pursue, or to acquire additional knowledge... One day the Shaykh was taking a walk with a friend of his and he was suddenly hit by nostalgia to his homeland, so he recited:

*O how much I miss the life whose prime  
I spent between Sel'ah, Bareesh and Ma'roub*

The Iranian friend inquired: "And where exactly is that Sel'ah, my dear Shaykh?" And the Shaykh, enticed by the evil spirit, wished to glorify his home village, so he answered: "Sel'ah is a city between Seida and Sour." The Iranian friend lifted his eyes toward heaven and said in amazement: "Praise to Allah, my dear Shaykh, for his world is so vast and wide!"

I didn't disclose to my friend that day how awfully significant his story was. I did feel, however, that Sel'ah was no longer situated between Seida and Sour but, rather, between Tallouza and Fassouta. And that significantly complicated "*jughrafiya al-wahm*" (the geography of fantasy), as coined by my friend Husni Zayni, so much so that I felt the need, from then on, to be constantly on the alert. For how could Tallouza be drawn away outside this world if the world was so wide; and how could one reconcile oneself to the miniscule size of Fassouta if Sel'ah was "a city between Seida and Sour"?

Be that as it may, I realized then that I was growing old and, subsequently, ready to make the acquaintance of people from Fassouta and Tallouza. So far, no one has ever arrived from Tallouza, but Fawwaz Traboulsi arrived the other day from Paris and handed me your letter. And you are, as you may well know, a person from Fassouta... So it's all right now, I guess, to bid farewell to that entire childhood of mine...

Take care, my friend --  
Ahmad

\*\*\*

I have always wanted to *return* to Beirut (or Berout, as we used to, and still, call it), even though I'd never been to this city before, or to any other Arab city for that matter. That's what one would go through in point of chronotopic immobility--assuming that Bakhtin was right--when the wrong passport is literally imposed on one. As you may well know, unlike identity a passport is not a self-issued document, so I'm absolved of its sins. But my mother tongue, being the ultimate chronotope, used to take me there, and I mean – *take me there*, in the most tangible and physical manner, and to bestow upon me the unconditional, the no-strings-attached gift of a Beirut past; a past like my mother's.

But my mother was born in Sour, long before the city was reinvented (or should I say, “recreated”) by Sa'id 'Aql, a couple of months after her father had passed away. She spent an orphaned adolescence in Beirut and Al-Batroun, alternately, in the 1930s. That adolescence ended with a 3-year ebb and flow of a love story with my Palestinian would be father. And that love story culminated in a wedding early in 1940, with “just a peasant from Palestine” (that phrase must have set tongues wagging between Al-Batroun and Beirut). And that wedding took place in the Maronite church of St. Estefan in Al-Batroun, because the Catholic priest in Beirut, for reasons you must be more familiar with, refused to marry the couple. My mother would of course vehemently oppose the usage of the compound “love story” in this context – *that* is an imaginary construct, she would say, invented by *kuttab*, book-writers, and real life as we know it has nothing to do with *it*. Besides, contrary to what Elias Khoury tells us in *Bab Al-Shams*, it's really impossible to *have* a love story with a Palestinian. But I'll take the liberty of naming it as such, *kuttab*-style, simply because we are in Beirut, where fantasy is permissible, let alone all the other things...

She lives all by herself now in Haifa, the city created in the Palestinian imaginary by Ghassan Kanafani. Her Lebanese accent has long eroded, except for what could be termed as “code-words.” As if she wanted to diminish the patch of her nostalgia to a place she could never go back to by repressing the unconscious language of that place, by diminishing the space which that place

occupies in her language. Nonetheless, when asked what she misses the most in her eighteen Lebanese years, my mother would say, rather apologetically, with an eighty-something year old sigh: "I wish I could stand again on the beach of Sour, being eight years old, and breathe in the sea wind, *hawwa 'l-bahr*." And the word "*hawwa*," the way Arabic words tantalize us, turns the soft wind into desire and love and longing and nostalgia; turns the vertical, diachronic "*alif*" into an "*alif maqsurah*," a synchronic, horizontal cradle of warmth and tenderness.

What follows, then, are my personal variations on *hawwa 'l-bahr*, and a nostalgic return to one of my personal capitals of fantasy - Beirut; a return to my mother('s) tongue, at more levels than one; a return to the unconscious of that mother tongue; an attempt to sort and map out the itineraries of my cultural imaginaries of Beirut, few as they might be, from the allegedly safe, and equally imagined distance of exile. After all, we, the orphaned children of the Arab *Nahdah*, and as Jurji Zaidan has taught us, are all *Byaarte*, Beirutis, in some way or another; we are all the virtual citizens of Beirut, *the* Arab capital of the nineteenth century, attempting perpetually, with a stretch of the imagination, to make our way back to it.

When she was eight, breathing in the *hawwa* of Sour, my mother took a secret journey to Haifa, where she would end up, eventually, so many years later. The family of her *Haifawi* uncle was visiting Sour, and when they left back they took little Helène, my future mother, with them, to spend the summer vacation in Haifa. At Ras en-Naqrurah check point, and since little Helène wasn't registered in any travel documents, her cousin Alice hid her under her skirt, and the *darak* policeman didn't suspect a thing. Now, sixteen-year old Alice was, from revealed tip to skirt-hidden toe, madly in love with Fouad, my mother's other cousin, whose family was also living in Sour.

So, on a hot *Haifawi* summer day, Alice couldn't take the longing any longer, and decided to travel all the way to Sour to see her Fouad, even though the young, blue-eyed chap wasn't at all aware of this all consuming love, and "wouldn't even look in her direction," as my mother would claim, even if he *was* aware of it. But love was blind and, contrary to what Aristophanes believed, so

were the neighbors, who were supposed to keep “ten eyes” on the young woman in love when her parents were out and, alas, failed to. Around noon that day she took little Helène with her and, without telling anyone else, tiptoed to the service station to Sour. At Ras en-Naqurah, the same trick was repeated – little Helène was concealed under the invisibility skirt of Alice... And you can imagine the rest of the story, when the family in Haifa discovered that Alice had disappeared, together with little Helène, to an undisclosed destination.

In a certain sense, then, her smuggling act of border crossing was never registered, or recorded, at the checkpoint, not even by herself. Haifa for her, to this very day, still is a mere geographic extension of that childhood of Sour and the adolescence of Beirut and Al-Batroun, all being capitals of fantasy for her, as she is still hiding under Alice’s skirt. My continuous returns to Beirut were always conducted, as is the case today, through a reading of her nostalgia, across borders that language can sometimes render invisible. Unfortunately, though, I’m not lucky enough, like her, to be able to cross borders while hiding under Alice’s skirt. (If my mother were here, I wouldn’t have dared to say this last sentence. But we are in Beirut now...)

My first image of Beirut has nothing to do with that wonderland of Alice, nor with her invisibility skirt; rather, it had a military-march like, anti-nostalgic and almost carnivalesque tinge to it:

*saff el-’askar tout tout  
wehna rayheen ’a Beirut*

"File of soldiers, tout tout / we are going to Beirut." This was a refrain we used to sing in northern Palestine in the ‘fifties, as part of a weird game whose details escape me now. We would march in Indian-file (no pun intended), putting our hands on the shoulders of the kid in front of us, singing our lungs out, going in circles, marching in place, and in effect – going, aimlessly, *nowhere* in particular, but somehow reaching Beirut at the end. That was Beirut for us as kids – going nowhere, yet moving inside language constructs and, years before Derrida, moving inside a signifier that was nothing more than a “trace,” not

tracking anything tangible and substantial but, rather, looking for more “tracks” of that trace. Beirut was there all right, in our song but, simultaneously, it was not. Because, though we were playing at a two-hour driving distance from the actual *place*, we--that “file of soldiers”--were actually light years away, and the only thing we could have of it was (as a Bakhtinian take on Derrida) merely an imaginary chronotopic trace. This was in the late fifties, probably around the same time that this city was going through its first major civil war less than a century after the “*hawadeth*,” “events,” of 1860, or the “*idhtirabaat*,” “disturbances,” as Jurji Zaidan, whose parents married that year, refers to it. In his autobiography he writes:

During that year the well-known disturbances occurred and the people of Beirut feared a general upheaval like that which had taken place in Lebanon and Damascus. They began to make preparations for flight. Grandmother said to my father, " We find ourselves in great distress and the city is in danger. So, either you marry the girl and take care of her or you dissolve the engagement and we take her with us." He preferred marriage and they were wed in the same year. (Philipp, 130)

And as a result of that "fortunate" turn of events, Zaidan "was born on December 14, 1861, which is the day Prince Albert (the husband of the queen of England) died." (131)

I first came upon the name of Jurji Zaidan in one of the books that were stuffed inside our bookcase, together with books that my mother had brought with her from Lebanon, across the border, to a small village in northern Palestine called Fassouta. Fassouta was considered by the people of Bent Jbayl, as mentioned in the preamble above, a part of what Husni Zayni calls “the geography of fantasy.” Our bookcase was embedded in the southern, stone-built, double-wall of our house (“*killeen*” wall), right above the couch, with its back touching the outside wall from within, its door the color of olives. I used to spend hours on end under that magic door, lying on the wooden couch (“*kanabai*” as we called it), slowly devouring its contents. There was a series of Lebanese text books published in Beirut, that belonged to my brother, who attended the local Catholic, private school, called *Al-Lughah Al-Arabiyyah* (*The*

*Arabic Language*), and a Reader called *Al-Mushawwaq*. It must have been in one of these textbooks that I read Jurji Zaidan for the first time - a short piece that used to make us laugh a lot. It had an illustration of a teacher sitting idly on the floor behind a wooden box, dozing off, and surrounded by a number of little kids whose faces expressed mischief and wretchedness. Or maybe that's how we saw that expression, as a reflection of our own world. But we never thought the scene could have taken place in Beirut. Many years later, I came across that text in Zaidan's *Mudhakkiraat*, and was shocked to discover that that school had indeed been once upon a time in Beirut:

The thought would not have occurred to anybody that the teacher Elyas was a learned philosopher: even the gospel he could hardly read properly. His school consisted of a wide vaulted cellar room ... It resembled more a cattle pen than a school. There the children of the neighborhood between the ages of four to ten—boys and girls—would convene and sit on the mat... The teacher would sit in front of the room on a hassock, in front of him a small box... upon which he put his book, his inkwell and his pens. At his right he had assembled a number of sticks varying in length and thickness. He would use each of them appropriately, according to age and sex of the child, and according to his closeness or distance to him. (Philipp, 136)

The other illustrations in *Al-Lughah Al-Arabiyyah* were of landscapes and city life and interiors of houses with people in suits and fancy dresses and nightgowns that we hadn't seen even in our dreams. They were so strikingly different from what we could see around us, in that world of shabbiness wretchedness, and poverty, in Palestine of the 1950s. But that was Beirut for us, as if another planet, where people were sitting in luxurious armchairs, enjoying the warmth of the fire-place in their houses, and where pupils attended schools that had spacious rooms, lit by electric lights, taught by teachers in three-piece suits. Even the illustrations of rural landscapes in those books, accompanying excerpts from Amin Nakhleh's *Al-Mufakkarah Al-Reefiyyah* (*The Countryside Diary*), were so different from what we could see around us, in that mountain village in northern Palestine. And even the goat, prostrating next to "The Goat's Prayer in the Countryside" from the *Diary*, looked gentler, more elegant and, indeed, more "goatish" than all the goats around us put together. Then the years

elapsed, and we discovered that those illustrations may have been copied from European schoolbooks, and that goat may have been of an “*ifranji*,” European pedigree. But we were content with fantasy, and content with what language could offer us in point of imagination and deceit.

And there was a photo in the family album, taken most probably in the early ‘fifties, of my two or three year old maternal cousin, walking in *Sata Al-Bur*, a partial view of the monument behind her, as my mother used to tell us, and in the deep background on the left - a partial view of a cinema, a billboard hanging on its front, carrying a huge poster whose details were completely blurred. This was the scene as we deciphered its signification years later, but in the ‘fifties we were still ignorant of what the word “cinema” meant, and what would cause people, who were presumably far more intelligent and knowledgeable in the matters of this world than we ever were, hang a picture of such dimensions so high up on the façade of a building.

Imagine, then, Mr. Muhammad Sowed, a *Fouad*, a heart, who didn’t know what cinema was! My mother, who hasn’t seen Beirut since mid ‘forties, tells me now when I ask her that the cinema was called chitchat. But Muhammad Soueid, who hasn’t left Beirut yet, tells me that the KitKat was actually in Al-Zaytouneh, and that it got the name after it was turned into a nightclub, and that it had a different name altogether before that. Is it Cinema Rivoli, then, in the picture? And where is the “sign” of Rivoli in this sliding game, this “slippage,” between the signifier and the signified; and has it left any “tracks” behind? And do we believe Soueid or, rather, my mother? Or do we believe both simultaneously? Or, better still, do we turn to Monsieur Foucault who tells us that:

The imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp. The fantastic is no longer a property of the heart nor is it found among the incongruities of nature ... Dreams are no longer summoned with closed eyes, but in reading ... The imaginary ... is a phenomenon of the library.<sup>1</sup> (105-6)

---

<sup>1</sup> In Amin Nakhleh’s *Fi Al-Hawaa’ At-Talq*, I later find the following lines, which I read under the light of the lamp in my library: “We were once sitting on the roof of ‘Miramar’ in Beirut, which is called the KitKat Club these days, and it was summer, and the sun was about to set, and the sea stretched itself out as far as the eye could see...” (76).



And that's what we used to indulge in, lying down, daydreaming under the olive-colored door of the bookcase. Actually, I remembered that picture of my cousin when I read the memoirs of Jurji Zaidan, and Al-Burj Square, which haunted the fantasies of our childhood, was conjured up all over again. This is how the Square seemed to the eleven year old Jurji, in the early 'seventies of the nineteenth century:

... When I was eleven years old and my knowledge was still faulty, my father needed me in his restaurant to render him temporary help in writing down the names and payments of customers ... He told me "Jurji , come assist me for seven or eight days until I find someone to replace you!" I went there against my will because I enjoyed my studies very much. I obeyed him, but still cherished the hope of returning to the school. These seven days stretched into seven or eight years. I spent them in the markets of Beirut amongst their crowds and was forced to associate with the lowliest groups amongst them, because our eating place-or restaurant-was in the areas of the Al-Burj Square. It was moved from one location to another but never was far off this Square. The Al-Burj Square was in those days the meeting point for the crooks, the rowdies and the idle – amongst them drunkards, gamblers, pimps and quarrelsome people. (Philipp, 139)

Things remind us of other things; things collapse over other things; things refer us to other things, away from their original referentiality; and the meaning that these things signify for us within language becomes contingent upon what they mean to us in a different linguistic context. So a square in a book reminds us of a square in a picture, and the square in the picture is reminiscent of a square in a tale which we are reminded of by a casual scene, an utterance, that ignites the sparkle, then ebbs away. For the Al-Burj Square in a map of Beirut may no longer provide the referentiality for all of this, or maybe it never did. And when I read what Jurji Zaidan says about a signified he refers to as Al-Burj Square, the Square around which he used to walk never crosses my mind; what does is, rather, the Square around which my cousin walks in a photo from the 'fifties, some eighty years later.

What happens to the signifier, then, when its signified disappears, becomes extinct; and does the disappearance of Al-Burj Square from a map of

Beirut make the Square somehow disappear from that picture and from my memories that are, in effect, a picture of the memories of my mother?

\*

“Of all the names, Khan Antoun Beik was the least in circulation. Because no one ever heard it anymore since the woman announcer had stopped mentioning it.” That’s how Hasan Daoud starts off his text “Khan Antoun Beik,” (dedicated to Muhammad Abi Samra). Then, in a series of flashes exchanged between two “taciturn men”, taking a stroll on the Corniche, he goes on to dissect the relationship between objects and their names, as the relationship becomes disjointed and the ties that connect signifier to signified unraveled. He is also wondering how does memory relate to this rupture. The two “taciturn men” recall, in Hasan Daoud’s fully diacriticized language, splinters of the vanishing name after the Khan itself has disappeared but remained present in the commercial of the woman announcer and in a photo published in a book containing other photos of old Beirut:

They said names were older than their places. And that street they had lost was in fact two streets: the one was in the old photo, and the other - in the commercial of the woman announcer. Two places for a single name. And they couldn’t bring the two places together within that name unless they wiped out what had existed in both, unless they turned the name into a vacant lot, and that was the price that places paid when they carried names that had already abandoned them... For in those days, the days of the woman announcer, the Khan was no longer there and Antoun Beik, the owner after whom the Khan was named, wasn’t around anymore. And of that person, Antoun Beik, nothing was left except his name, except the utterance of his name, rid of all that usually adheres to all things... And a name like that wouldn’t in any case drape itself over its street - sidewalks, asphalt and all, as if it were the separating membrane between street and space. (Daoud, 57)

Though all texts in the collection *Nuzhat Al-Maalak (Angel’s Stroll)* are diacriticized, the diacritic marks, or the “*harakaat*,” the “movements,” in this particular text, instead of merely adding Arabic vowel sounds to the letters, seem to perform a different role. For instead of adding “movements,” the diacritic marks in this story add a touch of immobility and groundedness to the language

employed for telling us the story of the evanescent and vanishing street. The diacritic marks look as if they were miniature nails that were meant to firmly attach the words onto the page and turn them into a substitute for the disappearing things they represent. Or, as if they were the old paving stones of the Khan, prior to the asphalt, being paved again, by a master's hand, on the page that replaced the street.

When I first read this text many years ago, it didn't take me to Beirut much as it referred me, instead, to the City of Brass, mentioned by the 12<sup>th</sup> century Al-Ghirnati's *Tuhfat Al-Alabaab*, along the tradition which Husni Zayni calls "the geography of fantasy," in a book of the same title (*Jughraphiya Al-Wahm*), which was my companion while writing these comments. Then *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah* (*A Thousand and One Nights*) picked it up where Al-Ghirnati had left off: it let Prince Mousa Ibn Nusayr enter the City of Brass, after he had almost despaired. And it added a rather brilliant sentence to the Ghirnati version: "They asked him where was the road leading to the City of Brass, and he pointed the way for us, and we realized that there were twenty five doors between us and the City, non of which was visible and non had left any tracks" (175). The sentence, in point of narration, is a prolepsis, or a flash-forward: the doors' enigma is unraveled later on - for the twenty-five doors cannot be seen and, subsequently, opened, except from inside the City walls. In other words - the door could be called a door only from the inside!

Would the imaginary that brought me to Beirut manage to find a door for me, and open it up from the outside?

Or should I, rather, wish for one of your keys?

---

© anton shammas, 2005

A talk given in Beirut, in a conference organized by The Lebanese Association For Plastic Arts, "Ashkal Alwan," in November 2003. Published in *HomeWorks II: A Forum on Cultural Practices* (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2005).

\*

## Works Cited

- Husni Zayni, *Jughrafiya Al-Wahm (The Geography of Fantasy)*; London: Riad El-Rayyes, 1989).
- *Gurgi Zaidan: His Life and Thought*, by Thomas Philipp (Beirut: 1979). [English translation of *Mudhakkiraat Jurji Zaidan*, ed. by Salah Al-Deen Al-Munajjid (Beirut: Dar Al-Kitaab Al-Jadeed, 1968)]
- Muhammad Soueid, *Ya Fou'aadi* (Beirut: Dar an-Nahaar, 1996).
- Michel Foucault, 'Afterword to *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*', in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954—1984, Vol. Two*, ed. by James D. Faubion, tr. Robert Hurley and others (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1998), pp. 103—22.
- Amin Nakhleh, *Fi Al-Hawaa' Al-Talq* (Beirut: Maktabat Al-Hayaat, 1967).
- Hasan Daoud, *Nuzhat Al-Malaak* (Beirut: Dar Al-Jadeed, 1992).
- Al-Ghirnati, *Tuhfat Al-Albaab* (Beirut: Al-Mu'assasah Al-Arabiyyah lid-Dirasaat wan-Nashr, 2003).
- "City of Brass," in *Alf Laylah wa-Laylah* (Beirut: Dar Maktabat at-Tarbiyah, 1987), Vol. 3, p. 165-188.