

ANTUN SA'ADEH
Intellectual Struggle in Syrian Literature

**Translated and Introduced by
Adel Beshara**

ANTUN SA'ADEH

Intellectual Struggle in Syrian Literature

First Edition

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Translator's Introduction

The *Intellectual Struggle in Syrian Literature* is a systematic study of Arabic literature in general and Syrian literature in particular. Written in eight fortnightly instalments in the Argentine-based *al-Zawba'a* newspaper from 15 August 1942 until 1 December 1942, the book was first published in Buenos Aires in December 1942, two weeks after the last instalment was published, and reprinted in the Lebanon in June 1947, about three months after Sa'adeh's return from exile.

Three pieces of literary correspondences that had inadvertently fallen into Sa'adeh's hand instigated the book. On reading the correspondences, Sa'adeh was struck by the dearth of discussion and opinions on poetry and poets expressed in them and "felt that a comprehensive study on literature was

necessary to resolve the numerous ambiguities that have caused our literature to veer off course and waste the efforts of the writers involved.” The result was not only a thorough critique of the correspondences, but also a critical review of both *Mahjari* and prominent Syrian and Egyptian writers: Taha Hussein, Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad, Hussein Heikal, Said Aql, Amin al-Rihani, and others. Throughout the review the question of literary revival loomed large, indicating that Sa’adeh had an abiding and deep interest in it.

With ethical care and commitment to objectivity, Sa’adeh then outlined his own new theory of literature. He argued that the literati of Syrian and Arab literature, both at home and abroad, had stumbled because they had failed to link the task of literary renewal to the renewal of life itself. In other words, literary revival and, by implication, the production of a world-standard literature, is stipulated by the emergence of a new outlook on life, the universe and art

derived from the annals of the nation's ethos and the demands and ambitions of a modern national society. It is the production of such an outlook that leads to a renewal of literature, not vice versa. On its own, literature cannot renew itself or produce a new outlook on life: it will either be a mirror of the ideals of the existing outlook or an echo of the ideals of another outlook. Either way, the task of renewal is contingent on a full transformation of life and the emergence of a new society.

Chronologically, the *Intellectual Struggle in Syrian Literature* should be recognised as the crowning point of a long and deep concern for the state of Syrian literature that had long been troubling Sa'adeh but which the complexities of politics and life in general had prevented him from addressing.

Saadeh had developed a strong passion for literature from an early age and retained it throughout his life. One of his first

journalistic contributions, in 1922, was a critical review of a literary work that had become a serious topic of controversy among Brazilian Syrians. The work was a poem written by Elias Farhat, a Mahjari poet who would subsequently form with a few other fellow poets a literary society called *al-Usba al-Andalusiyya* (The Andalusian League). Selected as an epigram to be inscribed on a monument presented by the Syrian community on the hundredth Anniversary of Brazil's independence, the poem was of the hyperbolic type that appertains to old Arabic poetry:

*If we cut what remained of Lebanon's
cedar trees
From that area which was the cradle of
inspiration,
And with it we build a temple
The towers of which drive into the chest of
clouds
And rob Baalbek and Tadmur of the ruins
of their extensive glory,*

*And forcefully pluck out Salah ul-Din's
grave from Damascus
And Christ the Saviour's from Jerusalem
And offer those treasures to this free country
and its noble people
We shall still feel that we have not shown
enough gratitude for their goodness*

Sa'adeh wrote a scathing two-part review of the selected poem dismissing it as an act of sycophancy and an insult not only to Muslims and Christians, but also to "the souls of those giants who built these glories and immortalised the name of Syria in history." Then with a wild grin of anger he exclaimed:

Who are Napoleon and Canton,
Wellington and Nelson and Washington
and Lincoln in the eyes of the Christian
World when compared with Jesus Christ?
Those great men and thousands of other
emperors and princes used to bend before
his name and throw themselves down and
kneel in deification at their churches - not

like suppliants at their masters' feet but
like worshipers before their Creator!"

An avid reader and an admirer of Arabic literature, especially Abu Ala' al-Ma'arri whom he described as "the pride of Arabic poets and philosophers," Sa'adeh's early writings included, as well, an appraisal of Elias Farhat's *Rubai'yat* and a lengthy seven-part review of Mayy Ziadeh's *al-Mussawat* (Equality). He also engaged in prose poetry with a moving poem modelled on Gibran's *Mata Ahli* (My Folks Died).

With the years Sa'adeh's interest in literature steadily increased. He began to experiment with novel writing, producing in 1931 two novellas (*Sayidat Saydnaya* and *Faji'at Hubb*). His profile for that decade included, in addition to the two novellas, several literary articles and critical essays on various literary themes: the meaning of 'High Ideal'; the role and place of poetry in literary renovation; the difference between the literature of books and the literature of life;

and the path that must be taken for Syrian literature to resurrect.

In 1936, a Lebanese magazine put forward the following question to Lebanese men of letters: “If you were not what you are who would you like to be?” Sa’adeh’s response came in the form of a literary narrative that showed both sophistication and poetic gifts:

If I were not what I am, I would like to have been the eagle that flies high in the wide space. To him, distances are not as long as they are to the short-winged.

If I were not what I am, I would yearn to have been the tunes that move along with the invisible waves of the Universe. They touch the pulses of the hearts and transform it into odes of love and strength, and they touch callous hearts to bring back to them the forgotten pulses of life...

Sa’adeh’s fascination with literary composition and literary criticism continued right up until he wrote the *Intellectual*. His literary pursuits were actually serious and

clearly show him to be concerned with literature as a national asset. He was solicitous as ever for literary quality and even more so for the establishment of a national canon for literary production, which is why he wrote at the start of the *Intellectual*:

The subject of literature continued to loom over me from behind the political, psychological and administrative problems that kept recurring. I was not unaware of the relevance of literature to these problems and of the possibilities of solving them through the creation of a dynamic, new literature. I agonized over the triviality in the existing literature of Syria and felt that the chaos and confusion evident in our literature and among our writers were due, largely, to the psychological disorientation, intellectual disarray and spiritual fissures rampant in our nation. This prodded me to take advantage of every opportunity that arose to draw the attention of those writers with whom I had contact to the paucity of Syrian literature, its miserable state and

the gravity of the consequences that might occur.

The *Intellectual Struggle in Syrian Literature* is more than just a book: it is a beautiful piece of literary work. Its originality and ongoing significance lie not only in the depth and complexity of its literary criticism but also in the philosophical intent and new theory of literature it purports to offer.

The book is a sincere call for the literati of Syria to think outside the box and beyond the obvious, to develop new paradigms of literature, and to take risks to develop their own creative imagination rather than settle for mediocrity. It is a call tinged with hope and anticipation of greater things to come, when the Syrian writers, poets and men of letters accept and rise to challenge with the energy, the right strategy and the commitment it takes to create a new outlook for the nation based on its undying ethos,

glorious past, heritage of myths and legends,
and its yearning for so much more in life.

If there is a single fitting description of
Intellectual Struggle in Syrian Literature it is
this: “the jewel of the literature of life.”

Introduction to the First Edition

In May of this year [1942], there fell into my hands a copy of the February 1935 issue of *al-Usha*,¹ which is the second number of the first year of the magazine published in São Paulo, Brazil. The copy had a dirty cover, several pages were torn away, and the remaining pages were loose and nearly falling apart. Despite its condition, I examined the magazine and gave it my full attention. I found it contained an exchange between three Syrian men of letters [*thalatha udaba' Suriyyin*]: (1) Amin al-Rihani,² (2) Yusuf Nu'man Ma'luf and (3) Shafiq Ma'luf.³ The exchange was in the form of three letters

¹ Founded by Shafiq Ma'luf, *al-Usha* served as the mouthpiece of the Brazilian-based literary society *al-Usha al-Andalusia* (Andalusian League), established in 1933.

² Born in Freike, near Beirut, Amin al-Rihani (1876-1940) was novelist, poet, essayist, and political figure whose written works examined the differences and intersections between the categories of "East" and "West." See Nathan C. Funk and Betty J. Sitka ed. *Ameen Rihani: Bridging East and West*. (New York: University Press of America, 2004).

³ Shafiq Ma'luf, born at Zahla, Lebanon, March 1905, died at Sao Paulo 1976; son of 'Isa Iskandar and brother of Fawzi. Shafik studied at al-Kulliyya al-Sharkiyya in Zahla. In 1922 he went to Damascus and joined the editorial staff of the newspaper *Alif-Ba'*. His first diwan of poetry, *al-Ahlam*, was completed in 1923. Shafiq left for Sao Paulo in 1926 where, with his uncle Michel and others, took an active part in founding *al-Usha*

containing opinions and theories on poetry and poets. Now, poetry and poets belong to the subject of literature and this subject has long attracted my attention because of the muddle and mess one finds there.

While reading the three exchanges and the final response that Shafiq Ma'luf appended to them before he sent them for publication in the *al-Usha*, I was struck by the depth of the intellectual deficiency exhibited in the letters. I felt that a comprehensive study on literature was necessary to resolve the numerous ambiguities that have caused our literature to veer off course and waste the efforts of the writers involved.

However, I could not undertake such a study because I was overburdened as editor-in-charge of *al-Zamha'a* and my task as writer of its most important philosophical, social and political articles and analyses. Furthermore, I had many duties associated with managing the overseas branches of the Syrian Social National Party and the numerous issues and problems confronting it, propagating the Social Nationalist ideology among the Syrian émigrés and keeping track of international politics and its impact on the Syrian nation and its Social National revival. I felt that, with such a heavy workload, I would not be able to undertake additional tasks without compromising my performance in many other issues. After giving a hasty consideration to this matter I decided to postpone the subject of literature to a more propitious time.

A few months later, I had completed some of the important tasks that needed to be addressed, but my workload

al-Andalusia in 1932. He earned his fame with his long poem 'Sha'ir fi fayyara' and the epic poem 'Abqar'.

on the whole increased rather than decreased. During this time, the subject of literature continued to loom over me from behind the political, psychological and administrative problems that kept recurring. I was not unaware of the relevance of literature to these problems and of the possibilities of solving them through the creation of a dynamic, new literature. I agonized over the triviality in the existing literature of Syria and felt that the chaos and confusion evident in our literature and among our writers were due, largely, to the psychological disorientation, intellectual disarray and spiritual fissures rampant in our nation. This prodded me to take advantage of every opportunity that arose to draw the attention of those writers with whom I had contact to the paucity of Syrian literature, its miserable state and the gravity of the consequences that might occur. I was also prompted to re-direct these writers to the demands of life and its fundamental issues and to the trajectories of the Syrian ethos in the general course of history.

Among those who contacted me in São Paulo, and with whom I raised the matter, were three members of the Andalusian League (*al-Usha al-Andalusia*).⁴ This occurred almost certainly in January 1939 when the three writers paid me an official visit. One of these three writers was the editor of *al-Usha* in which the literary correspondences were

⁴ A literary and cultural group formed by Arabic-speaking émigré writers in Latin America. It was founded in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 1932, and is considered one of the main manifestations of *Mahjar* literature in South America. From 1933 to 1953, it published the literary magazine *al-Usha*.

published. I asked the writers at that time about the purpose behind the founding of the "Andalusian League" and ascertained from their answer that nothing clear existed in this regard.⁵ I then ventured to give my opinion to them, which included a number of instructive ideas that subsequently led one of them to announce that the "Leader is an excellent speaker". However, I was deeply disappointed by this remark because the writer showed interest in the distinctive qualities of the "speaker" rather than in his ideas and opinions. Anyway, this precedent provoked a sense of an urgent need in me for a study on literature and its objective as well as on the literature that Syria required and its characteristics.

Between the urgency of this need and other issues that never ceased to accumulate on my desk, I decided to avail myself of the first opportunity to reconcile between the two. Once I had attended to the pressing issues at hand, I ventured to write on the subject based on the correspondence of the three writers published in the *al-Usha* magazine. The only practical approach possible, amidst the various tasks, was to write an installment of the study for every issue of *al-Zawba'a*.⁶ This approach interrupted my line of thought because I had to restrict myself to the number of columns I could use and

⁵ It has been suggested that the name was chosen because it harks back to a golden age and establishes a link with the tradition cultural values of an Arab past. This stands in sharp contrast to the "colourless name" *al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya* in North America. See Muhammad Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

⁶ A newspaper published by Saadeh in Argentina in the early part of the 1940s.

move on to deal with the other various issues. I would then return to the subject in time for the next issue, a break of almost 15 days, during which the thought was weighed down by many concerns and problems. Thus, every installment cost me a great deal of effort in linking the previous one with the new one. As a result, substantial and significant details were left out.

I wanted to confine myself to poetry, the central theme of the correspondence referred to above. However, soon after I wrote the first installment for the August 15 issue of *al-Zawba'a*, the opinions of several prominent writers from Syria and Egypt compelled me to modify this plan. The opinions were published in issues of *al-Hilal*, which I received as a gift from a fellow party member. Consequently, I expanded my study to literature in general without overstepping the limits of conciliation I had set for myself. This necessitated restricting the analysis to bare essentials and dispensing with elaborate details, preferring to allow our thinkers and writers to draw their own conclusions.

I published this study in eight installments, comparable to the articles that appeared successively in eight issues of *al-Zawba'a*, starting from the issue published on August 15, 1942 and ending with issue of December 1, 1942. During the course of the series, I received a number of letters from writers and lovers of literature expressing their interest in the study and a desire to acquire a copy of it for themselves. Some readers suggested that I should collate and publish the articles in a single book for a wider circulation of the theories

expressed in them. I completely agreed and seized the first opportunity to publish this book.

I took care to review and re-edit the study to eliminate the mistakes in the version that was published in *al-Zawba'a*. I also appended it with several supplementary documents that did not appear in *al-Zawba'a* due to technical difficulties arising from the operational system of Syrian printers in Buenos Aires.

Buenos Aires, 15 December 1942.

Introduction to the Second Edition

The few copies of the first edition of this book, which were originally published in Buenos Aires and made their way to the homeland, aroused a great deal of discussion among writers, scholars, students and circles that take an active interest in literary affairs and intellectual progress in Syria. Consequently, I was urged to bring out a second edition to make the work more readily accessible to scholars, literary critics and readers. Thus, I re-edited the book and dispatched it to the printer.

Stumble and Confusion

In its February 1935 issue, the Brazilian-based *al-Usha* magazine published three pieces of correspondence on a poetry collection entitled *al-Ablam* (*The Dreams*) by Shafiq Ma'luf, an emigrant resident of São Paulo. These three pieces drew my attention to the intellectual friction and disagreements about poetry and its objectives that emerged when *al-Ablam* was published. I felt that they opened the door to a study that ought to be brought to life and taken to heart by seekers of knowledge and understanding and those who crave cultural advancement, which enables nations to bring out the best of their talents and rise to the peak of their glory. First, however, I present the three letters together with the poet's final comments as they appeared in the now defunct *al-Usha*:

1. From Al-Rihani's letter

Al-Freike, April 12, 1926

Dear Shafiq al-Ma'luf, may God bless you,

I testify that you are a poet, but in *al-Ablam* you remain a long way from the essence of life and its grand purposes.

This tone - the tone of melancholy and sadness - was "fashionable" in the time of Byron⁷ and Musset.⁸

In the Orient, especially in us Syrians, it is an inconspicuous disease. For what good is the poet who weeps and cries just like the rest of mankind?

Artistically, your *al-Ablam* contains many creative metaphors, beautiful imagery, delicate expressions and smooth prologues. But you are an imitator, my friend. I will not say you are imitating Gibran, because he himself, in the abundant tears that he sheds, is an imitator like you. Read Isaiah rather than submerge yourself in the tears of Jeremiah. If you must go back, go back to Shakespeare⁹ and Goethe¹⁰ instead of burning your fingers in the cauldrons of Musset and Byron.

⁷ Lord Byron (1788 –1824) was a British poet, peer, politician, and leading figure in the Romantic movement. He is regarded as one of the greatest British poets and remains widely read and influential. Among his best-known works are the lengthy narrative poems *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. See John Galt, *The Life of Lord Byron*. (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830).

⁸ Alfred de Musset (1810 –1857) was a French dramatist, poet, and novelist. Along with his poetry, he is known for writing the autobiographical novel *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* (The Confession of a Child of the Century). See Richard J. Bourcier, "Alfred de Musset: Poetry and Music." (*The American Benedictine Review*, Vol. XXXV, 1984):17–24.

⁹ William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616) was an English poet, playwright and actor, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's greatest dramatist.

¹⁰ Johann Goethe (1749 –1832) was a German writer and statesman. His works include four novels: epic and lyric poetry; prose and verse dramas; memoirs; an autobiography; literary and aesthetic criticism; and treatises on botany, anatomy, and colour.

A poet is not "a Lilly in a skull". [Translator's note: Gibran's depiction of a poet] This sickly exaggerated metaphor lacks any semblance of reality and beauty. It is demeaning to the human race, to which you and I belong, thanks to God. In the universe and in life, a beauty is greater and more sublime and splendid than the delicate limited beauty of the Lilly. The sun, the moon, the galaxy, Gibran,¹¹ you and me are sparkling embodiments of that beauty, praise be to God.

As to the poet, he is both one of the people and from the core of the people. He who thinks that he is above the people is the most unpoetic of creatures. True poetry is a mirror for groups, a beacon in the darkness, an aid in times of adversity, and a sword in calamities. A true poet erects castles of love, wisdom, beauty and hope for nations. Dry your tears: may God protect you. Raise for this nation that is floundering in darkness a beacon of light, hope, good health and well-being. Indeed, in good health there is a new life.

Your friend,
Amin al-Rihani

2. From the letter by the proprietor of *al-Ayyam*

New York, July 14, 1926

Dear Shafiq,

I wish that time allowed me to express at length some of my observations about your collection of poems, but

¹¹ Khalil Gibran (1883 –1931) was a Syrian-American writer, poet, visual artist and Syrian nationalist best known for his work *The Prophet*.

unfortunately, my wishes cannot be granted. Here, we are slaves to our time. However, this does not prevent me from stating my opinion about vital matters to which I want you to pay close attention.

Give due care in your projected writings to break ground in what you aspire to, whether in theory or in practice, and to be “imitated” [*muqallad*] rather than “imitative” [*muqallid*], since a person's fame in life depends on this basic principle. Above all, discard imagination that lacks soul or truth. Always choose vital constructive topics and expose without any fear of blame the points of weakness in our nation, pointing out every shortcoming in its morals, every flaw in its customs and every deficiency in its structure for the sake of pure desire for reform and nothing else. Do not spend your whole life weeping and lamenting over empty encampments [*al-tulul al-baliya*] and wasted ruins, which is what most Eastern writers do (especially the poets among them). Rather, be an Easterner in your imagination. Work and touch with your bare hand the facts of existence and seek to work in their light at all times, because the skies above the East rise above all other skies. From them religions have been revealed, prophets have appeared and spiritual fantasies of many different tendencies and creeds that wrought evil havoc in life for the East and beyond it have developed. So, Shafiq, be a man of the truth who will not be misguided by imagination

...

Your Uncle,
Yusuf Nu'man Ma'luf

3. Shafiq Ma'luf's reply

Zahleh, September 15, 1926

Dear respected uncle,

... As for your remarks about "The Dreams", I have given them my full attention and taken your advice to heart. Concerning me being "imitated rather than imitative in all my works", it is something that I have aspired for since my early years. I firmly believed even then in the necessity of innovation in Arabic poetry and of breathing a modern spirit into it. If I had knocked on a door that others have previously walked through, then is there in everything that the minds have tackled any door left that people have not yet knocked on? If a painter portrays a scene that others before him had painted, but with the use of new colors and new symbols and forms, would it be right to deny his art and creativity because the same scene was portrayed on another canvas before his and had crossed the mind of another painter?

As to discarding "imagination that lacks soul or truth" and seeking instead "vital constructive topics" in my poetry, with all due respect to your fine opinion, dear uncle, I have another opinion of poetry. In my eyes, it is that pulsating feeling that depicts to people the souls of people, and its usefulness does not exceed, in many cases, the benefit that one attains when he listens to a beautiful piece of music, be it euphonic or melancholic. I might be wrong from the rewarding international aspect, but I am right as far as timeless art is concerned.

Our nation has its writers and journalists. It has their sensitive pens and charged minds. But for a poet to follow accidental situations and to make a lot of noise around him that vanishes when those situations disappear, I do not submit to this. To me, the poet is not someone who is applauded by one generation only to be forgotten by the following generations as situations change and new conditions arise.

I know that the Orient does not need art as much as it needs vital constructive topics, but these topics are restricted to time, my dear uncle. I am a fan of eternal poetry that cannot be tied down to the times.

Sincerely,
Shafiq Ma'luf

4. Addendum - February 22, 1935

It has been quite a while since these three letters were written. If I were asked now for my opinion of what the two renowned writers had criticized me for on account of the gloominess and moaning in *al-Ablam*, I would join them in criticizing myself for that style if the poem was the product of this present time. However, since it was written when I was barely eighteen and under the influence of an adolescence infested with darkness, confusion, and anxiety, I see it as a true image of my mental state at that time just as it may be an image of the mental state of most boys that age. This is what endears it to me and sets its value in my eyes.

Shafiq Ma'luf

I believe that the topic addressed in the three pieces of correspondence should not remain within the preliminary limits in which they appeared. The meanings they convey are brief fragments that do not serve a purpose or quench a thirst. If their brevity can be justified on the grounds that they were private letters, nothing can justify merely glancing over them without studying and analyzing the ideas stated in them. I do not think that the Addendum, in which the poet responds to the two letters of his critics, reaches a level that satisfies a soul that would not be contented by a mere trickle from the vastness of the sea or by a small space in the wider horizon.

Nor do I aspire to say everything I would like to say about literature and art from the highest perspective that human perception can reach, in all their forms and sorts, in a brief newspaper article penned under pressing and overburdening circumstances. Nonetheless, it is necessary that I say something in order to keep the subject alive and to inspire and stimulate the men of letters into studying it further. It is essential at least to state some of the observations that occurred to me upon reading the letters.

I shall start with al-Rihani's letter. Parts of it require much scrutiny. I can clearly discern in it a generalization that sweeps away many particulars without which the major fundamental truth remains strikingly deficient and the intellect agitated and unable to find stability or comfort without its existence and clarification.

Al-Rihani delved into *al-Ablam* and found a collection of poems dominated by "a tone of melancholy and sadness". He

described this tone as being "fashionable" in the days of Byron and Musset. I do not have a copy of *al-Ablam* to check if it meets this description and scrutiny, but I did a quick reading of this collection about 14 years ago. I recall that the effect it had on me was that of the pulses of first sensation when the clouds of adolescence clear away to reveal the rainbow of youth blending in it longings and desires that assume metaphors of powerful and at times pungent beauty, but metaphors that also reveal poetic beauty worthy of a firm place within souls and generations. Even so, the expression "a tone of melancholy and sadness" averred by al-Rihani is one of those generalizations that are of little benefit in a specialized or detailed study of a particular topic. It is also a long way from addressing the psychological aspect and its related causes.

A clear example of this is when al-Rihani moves from addressing the composer of *al-Ablam* to addressing the Syrian poets *en mass*: "Read Isaiah rather than submerge yourself in the tears of Jeremiah. If you must go back, go back to Shakespeare and Goethe instead of burning your fingers in the cauldrons of Musset and Byron". If these words were said in a context other than a review of *al-Ablam*, his sweeping and rather loose generalization would have been far more substantial. It would be a general discourse open for everyone to draw any conclusion he wishes from it. However, in its present context, it is of little consequence and it does not get better with al-Rihani's remarks that a poet is not "a Lilly in a skull" or that "a true poet is a for groups, a beacon in the darkness, an aid in times of adversity and a sword in

calamities. He builds for nations castles of love, wisdom, beauty, and hope.” In fact, this last observation, with which al-Rihani tries to shift from Socratic negativity into a positive perspective, serves only to exacerbate the previous generalizations. It may well be considered an ambiguity that has almost nothing to do with the main topic or its central themes.

In fact, this kind of talk is more relevant to poetry and poets in general than to *al-Ablam*. It is highhanded, unrestrained, uttered without examination or scrutiny, and wanting in even a single fundamental truth that could be relied upon to “build castles of love, wisdom, beauty, and hope” for nations whose castles have been destroyed or never had castles.

I do not think that the poets of Syria will become any different from what they are by reading the Book of Isaiah¹² and discarding the Book of Jeremiah.¹³ Of itself, going back to Shakespeare and Goethe will not be of much benefit unless an intelligent and perceptive culture already exists consistent with the trajectories of the Syrian ethos. Likewise, what did Arabic literature gain from the Egyptian poet Ahmed

¹² The first of the Latter Prophets in the Hebrew Bible and the first of the Major Prophets in the Christian Old Testament. It is identified by a superscription as the words of the 8th-century BCE prophet Isaiah ben Amoz, but there is extensive evidence that much of it was composed during the Babylonian captivity and later.

¹³ The second of the Latter Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, and the second of the Prophets in the Christian Old Testament.

Shawqi's¹⁴ return to Shakespeare, other than copying, mutilation and imitation [*al-naskh wa-l-maskh wa-l-taqlid*] that added less than an iota to the treasure of world literature?

Concerning al-Rihani's assertion that a true poet "is a mirror for groups, a beacon in the darkness", it is, as I have already stated, an instance of an ambiguity that does not take us one step beyond Gibran's depiction of the poet as a "Lilly in a skull". The mirror for groups is not the poet alone or every poet. Dr. Khalil Sa'adeh¹⁵ once noted:

The press of every nation is a measure of its progress, an image of its morals, an expression of its feelings, and a mark of its glory. It is the mirror through which the nation can see itself.

The philosopher, the artist, the writer, the poet, the leader and the scientist can be a beacon in darkness or "a support at times of adversity and a sword at times of calamity", each in his own special way. In this fact lies a secret revealed neither in al-Rihani's letter nor in anything else that he has written. Al-Rihani revisited this topic in an article titled "You the

¹⁴ Ahmed Shawqi (1868–1932) was an Egyptian poet and dramatist who pioneered the modern Egyptian literary movement, most notably introducing the genre of poetic epics to the Arabic literary tradition. See Glimpses of Ahmed Shawqi's Life and Works, *Egypt Magazine*, Issue No. 19-Fall 1999.

¹⁵ Antun Sa'adeh's father and a polymath. See Adel Beshara, *Khalil Sa'adeh: Many Men in One Man*. (Al-Furat/Iphoenix Publishing, 2015).

Poets"¹⁶ in which he extensively dispraised weeping and wailing but failed to give the poets a single cue to help them to move towards a new direction. All his words were of the ambiguous muddled kind that resembles the appeal, by some, for national unity without comprehending or defining nationalism and its components.

At this point, I will leave al-Rihani's letter and move on to Yusuf Ma'luf's letter. This letter contains blunt or direct opinions drawn from the American pragmatic life with its peculiarly Anglo-Saxon character. It lacks depth and suffers from a clear absence of a philosophical or historical perspective. The opinions stated in it are a blend of egocentric tendency, pragmatic desires and general arbitrary judgments, as in his remark: "From them [i.e. skies of the East] religions have been revealed, prophets have appeared, and spiritual fantasies of many different tendencies and creeds have developed that wrought evil havoc in life for the East and beyond it".

Conversely, the egocentric tendency is clearly apparent in his assertion: "Give due care in your future works to be creative in your endeavors, whether in thought or deed, and to be imitated, not an imitator, in all your work, since a man's fame in life depends on this basic rule". It is as if individual fame has become the ultimate end of theory and practice or that the most important criterion here is that a person should not follow or be followed by another. This is a purely

¹⁶ See George Nicolas El-Hage, *Ameen al-Rihani: You...The Poets*. (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017)

individualistic advice, probably motivated by the fact that the addressee is the uncle of the addressed and is concerned about his personal status out of allegiance to blood ties, which is inclined towards boastfulness and pride, as widely practiced among the Arab tribes. Although the addressed, the poet who is the target of criticism, accepted this individualistic idea in his reply to his uncle, he did not commit himself to it entirely. He posed this question to his uncle: "If I had knocked on a door that others have previously walked through, then is there in everything that the minds have tackled any door left that people have not yet knocked on?" The question almost amounts to knocking on a door that opens to a distant horizon in which the first light of a new dawn of genuine thought is breaking through, and it is only one short jump away from entering through that door. However, it is that one short jump that separates the two worlds. It is somewhat akin to jumping over a high beam or a fence using a long walking stick prepared especially for that purpose.

Likewise, pragmatic desires stand behind the uncle's admonition to his poet nephew when he says: "Above all, discard imagination that lacks soul or truth. Always choose vital constructive topics . . ." etc. In a word, it implies that imagination always has no spirit or truth in it, and that poetry is wholly imagination. Here, the uncle's criticism of the poet turns into a kind of dispraise of poetry and a relative indication of the necessity to abandon it and move on to tackle "vital and constructive topics... pointing out every shortcoming in its morals, every flaw in its customs, and every deficiency in its structure". This is all irrelevant to poetry and

poets. It is more a matter of concern for the scholars of sociology, psychology and politics. Were it not for this specific guideline, it would have been possible to tolerate the critic's observation and to consider it useful to discard the kind of imagination that has no soul and no truth for another that does. The poet's reply to this suggestion, from the perspective of poetry, cannot be faulted, especially the part:

Our nation has its writers and journalists. It has their sensitive pens and charged minds. But for a poet to follow accidental situations and to make a lot of noise around him that vanishes when those situations disappear, I do not submit to this. To me, the poet is not someone who is applauded by one generation only to be forgotten by the following generations as situations change and new conditions arise.

These are the words of a person who savors the sublime message of the poet and artist, one of whose most important qualities is creativity through imagination. These words are much more striking than his remark that the poet's duty is to "depict to people the souls of people", which, in fact, is equivalent to al-Rihani's observation that a poet is "the mirror of groups" and may have been influenced by it. However, it is inconsistent with it when the details are broken down. "The mirror of group" may mean "the soul of the group" whereas "the souls of people" probably means "the souls of the individuals".

Within their respective contexts, the two statements are weak because they do not consist of a single scientific, psychological or philosophical issue or a watertight understanding of the soul of the group and the soul of the individual and the difference between the two. In this respect, the second statement is weaker than the first because it is more generalized and thus more ambiguous. However, if we were to scrutinize this statement and look at it in the way we look at the intention of a meaning in itself, then we would find it stronger, in its essence, than al-Rihani's statement because it highlighted the term "soul" which, whether it is singular or plural, is indicative of the strongest and most sublime in human beings. In contrast, al-Rihani's statement does not entail us to delve into psychological issues and may simply mean highlighting the affairs and customs of the group.

It is rather bizarre that the same poet who had said earlier these powerful words about poets and their message did not find, more than nine years later, anything of value to add to them or to take the argument further. He sufficed, in his final comment on the two letters of his critics with the observation that "If I were asked now for my opinion of what the two renowned writers had criticized me for on account of the gloominess and moaning ... I would join them in criticizing myself".

Needless to say, the inconsistency and confusion in the essence and characteristics of poetry, illustrated in the examples discussed so far in this study, are not limited to the three aforementioned Syrian men of letters. They encompass

most of the prominent literati, if not all of them, in the Arab world. In fact, while domiciled here in Argentina where special circumstances had brought my planned forward journey to a stop,¹⁷ I was fortunate to receive a gift of literary material from a zealot comrade that included old issues of *al-Hilal*. As I was flipping through some of the 1933 issues, immediately after I had written the last instalment, my eyes fell on an opinion written by Hussein Heikal, a distinguished Egyptian writer.¹⁸ It was in the June issue of that year. I read the article only to find it added another ring of confusion to the closed circuit around literature imbued with a set of generalizations and abstractions that add nothing positive. Here are some of his impressions:

I understand renewal to be that the poet or writer is able to sense the mood of the age in which he lives and to express this in a sincere manner that represents the traits of that age in which he wrote such an expression so that the poet of the 14th Hijri century or the 20th century AD has a special personality that is different from that of the poet or writer who lived in previous centuries, given that the principles and limits of the language are preserved . . .
I do not mean by special traits that the poets of the modern

¹⁷ Sa'adeh left to South America in 1938 on a tour of his party's branches. On his arrival in Brazil he was arrested but was released soon after charges of working for Nazi Germany were dropped. He was then banished to Argentina whereupon his passport was confiscated preventing him from traveling to any other country or to return to his homeland.

¹⁸ Hussein Heikal (1888 – 1956) was an Egyptian writer, journalist, politician and Minister of Education in Egypt.

age should aim to use the terminology of modern inventions in their poetry or to describe those inventions and then call that "innovation", thus describing the train or plane or canon just as the poets of the past described the camel or the sword ... or that if the poets of the past had used in their poetry the female names Hind, Leila and Da'd, the poets of the present should use the modern names Sousou, Sawsan, Margaret, Mary . . . etc. Rather, what I mean by special traits is [the ability] to highlight everything felt by emotions within the realm of a given environment and to offer a sincere expression of life in this environment and its peculiar circumstances, giving it a distinctive character so that any deviation from that character amounts to a deviation from that environment. In the present and in the environment you live in, you can describe the camel or the sword or other things that the poets of the past had described in a manner consistent with the mood of the time in which you live and the prevailing mentality in this day and age. It would then be said that you described these things in a new manner.

Hussein Heikal holds that there is no "poetry expressive of our time, and that we do not have poets with distinctive traits that stand out from the traits of some poets of past ages". He adds: "I am convinced that the historian of Arabic literature in future generations, if you were to present him with a poem from this present time with the proper nouns deleted from it, he would not be able to determine the age or generation in which it had been composed". However, Heikal would admit

that Prose "had excelled in its strength and disposition towards revival and the advancement of mental life in it along with its fertility, complexity and output".

This opinion is profoundly vague and very confusing. Just look at the ambiguity that exists in the following phrase: "Rather, what I mean by special traits is [the ability] to highlight everything felt by emotions within the realm of a given environment and to offer a sincere expression of life in this environment and its attending circumstances". What can a perceptive reader possibly understand from these descriptions that only render the described more ambiguous? What is meant by "emotions within the realm of a given environment" and how does it happen? And what exactly is "life in this environment and its peculiar circumstances"?

In the November 1933 issue we find another opinion about innovation in poetry expressed by the Egyptianized Syrian poet Khalil Mutran.¹⁹ His opinion is more accurate than that of Heikal's. Mutran disagrees with the latter's opinion that no innovation was made in poetry. Referring to himself, he says:

I have wanted to innovate in poetry at a very young age, and I met much obstinacy and opposition because of that ... I wanted to innovate in poetry and did as much as I could out of a personal conviction that the condition for the survival of a living language lies in poetry just as in

¹⁹ Khalil Mutran (1872 – 1949), also known by the sobriquet *Shā'ir al-Qutrayn* - literally meaning "the poet of the two countries") was a Syro-Lebanese poet and journalist who lived most of his life in Egypt.

prose. Nevertheless, I was forced, in consideration of the events surrounding my upbringing, not to surprise people with everything that was on my mind, especially not to surprise them with images as much as my knowledge of the legacy of the eloquent poets of the past allowed. I have liberated myself from it while pretending to follow it, with a particular type of description, metaphors, and following up ... etc.

After this, Mutran gives a short description of the language's need for all the different types of correct, clear and accurate expression. Then he arrives at a conclusion that is similar to the aimless conclusion reached by al-Rihani, Yusuf Ma'luf, and Hussein Heikal. He says:

I want our poetry to be a true mirror of our time in its different stages of progress. Just as everything in the world has changed, I want our poetry to change and at the same time remain Oriental, Arab and Egyptian. And this is not unattainable.

The same issue of *al-Hilal*, in which Mutran's views on poetry renovation are stated, also contains an article by Hussein Heikal about "fine arts and their impact on the life of our Arab Orient". In this article, Heikal summarizes al-Rihani's perspective in his campaign against emotional literature through his critique of Beshara al-Khoury's²⁰ poem that starts

²⁰ Beshara al-Khoury - al-Akhtal al-Saghir – (1885-1968) was born in Beirut. He founded the newspaper al-Barq in 1908 which continued until

with "Love, youth and hope inspire, thus resurrecting poetry to life" and Beshara al-Khoury's perspective in his response to al-Rihani, which does not differ drastically from Shafiq Ma'luf's perspective in his reply to his uncle in the aforementioned letter to him.

In this article, Heikal tried to be more precise than in his earlier opinion stated above. He says that the two perspectives (of al-Rihani and al-Khoury) are about the nature of existence and explains the origin of the controversy as one of the results of "the political humiliation and social decay that afflicts the Arab East". Then he proceeds to give a firmer and a somewhat more positive clarification, stating:

What the arts have been hit with is due to the post-war condition through which the Arab East and humanity at large are passing. However, it is a situation that cannot be treated by denying tears and melancholy of their impact in human life. Rather, the cure is by creating a condition for the tears to reinvigorate and the psychological melancholy to revive to seek the High Ideal just as enthusiasm, help and virility do. If the masters of art in literature, singing, painting and all the other fine arts place this example before their eyes, they would inject a new life in art, one that is much stronger than its present life, and the exchange between Amin al-Rihani and

the beginning of 1933, when the French authorities closed it and abolished its concession. His life was a series of literary and political battles, in which he pledged his pen and poetry to defend his nation and awaken their hopes against colonialism and Zionism. In a ceremony honoring him at UNESCO's Beirut Hall in 1961, Beshara was dubbed 'Prince of Poets'.

Beshara al-Khoury last summer would not have taken place".

After this, Heikal attempts to take a more decisive step, stating:

What could this "High Ideal" be? I believe that the Orient has lost its way in recent times under the influence of Western teachings. Its High Ideal has become materialistic that considers freedom, on the back of which the soul soars to the highest realm, attained when the appetites of the body and the lusts of the flesh have satisfied all their desires. The natural environment in the West might be such that it propels towards such an Ideal. However, the natural environment of the Orient and its history from time Immemorial, particularly since the spread of Islamic civilization in its land, renders this 'High Ideal', which the West pursues with vigour, a fraction of what the Oriental soul would aspire for.

He adds:

The Oriental soul believes in the unity of existence and discerns in this unity, in the contact with it, and in the spiritual extinction (*fana'*) in it, the aim it seeks. This explains why proverbs of this Orient run along such lines as "he who prides himself on other than God will be belittled and he who seeks help from other than God will be shamed". These proverbs see nothing comparable in life to the fear of God. I wonder if art can portray these

meanings and rise with them to the highest attainable ranks of sublimation?

This commentary is the first attempt to move from ambiguity to clarity, from general to specific, and from passive to active. It is, nonetheless, a vague, confused, generalized and arbitrary attempt in which Heikal looks at art from the perspective of "East/West". He defines East in a way that lacks insight into the history of his so-called "East" and he defines a philosophy neither of that history nor of the Mohammedanism to which he imparts, emphatically, such a narrow description. It would have been better if he had not sought to divest it of the practical properties it acquired from the material life of its original environment. As for his designation of a 'High Ideal' for the whole Orient (including the Arab World), it is a narrow arbitrary kind of designation that is more acceptable to the ordinary readers and those of shallow intellect due to their simplicity and the little contemplation and effort it requires. It is not, however, a designation that a basic philosophical mind can accept and feel at ease with psychologically and conceptually. As a form of shallow thinking that draws its conceptions from existing conditions, it differs significantly from Dr. Khalil Sa'adeh's view of the religious spirituality of the East:

For an Easterner, religion is an indispensable part of his life. To him, life is a means to venerate religion (devoutness to God and spiritual extinction in the unity of existence) and not the other way around, that is to say that religion is not a means to venerate life and to elevate

it from its animalistic level to a spiritual level that cleanses the morals and tears down the unnatural barriers that stands between himself and his fellow brother in nationalism and humanity.²¹

I firmly believe in the fallibility of this “superficial” division that identifies the West wholly with materialism and the Orient wholly with spiritualism and regards the desire to satisfy bodily needs and its desires as a “product of Western teachings”.

In my opinion, the stalling of the course of civilization in the Orient at a certain point in time had compelled the Oriental soul to turn to self-extinction in the mystic matters of spiritual affairs. As a result, the affairs of the non-material and metaphysics became the only point of reference for the soul, which was forced along this course due to its abandonment of the affairs of existential, material and sensual world. And where the forces of civilization became almost non-existent, the metaphysical demands themselves, for the most part, became material so that paradise became a place abounding in jewellery, clothes, perfumes, and the like.

In addition, I believe that the on-going progress of civilization in the Mediterranean basin and the West, beginning with Syria, meant that the psychological, existential, material and sensual issues took up the greater share in the preoccupation of the self. Thus, materialism and

²¹ *Al-Majalah*, first year, issue no. 13, Buenos Aires, 25 December.

spiritualism were the lot for both the West and the Orient. In fact, from the standpoint of life, a large portion of the mystic psychological issues that preoccupy the peoples of “Oriental psyche” can hardly be considered spiritual in the vital sense. All of the widespread mystical beliefs in the West, such as spirituality, Sufism, and other types, fall under the same rubric. Moreover, just as materialism existed in the West, it also existed in the Orient. The pursuit of materialistic love and bodily desires, for example, appeared separately both in the East and the West. Similarly, in the arts that are expressive of the Oriental psyche, we find that music, which is called “Arabic” or “Oriental”, took a materialistic turn towards acute desire. In contrast, Western music scored a magnificent victory over materialism and rose above the sphere of carnal desire. Hence, the Orient has a strong materialism as well as a spiritual nature concerned with the mystical issues that do not show up either in life or existence; and the West, too, has a strong materialism and a spiritual nature concerned with existence and the transcendence of life within human existence, except that its spiritualism is contrary to the spiritualism of the Orient which seeks transcendence beyond the material world (the human world). Therefore, it is a grave fallacy to call transcendence beyond the material world “spiritualism” and transcendence within the material world “materialism”.

If the East, groping about as it may be in the shackles of materialism, had discerned, in its most sublime Indian and Chinese philosophies, that the only way to defeat materialism is by neglecting the issues and culture of the matter, the

Syrian mind, which laid down for the West and the Mediterranean the foundations of their material and spiritual culture, had discerned, long ago, that defeating the matter is attained by tackling it, by taking control of it, and by subordinating it to the beautiful psychological goals which render human life more graceful, more truthful and more radiant.

Heikal's definition of 'High Ideal' as "He who takes pride in other than God will be belittled, and he who seeks help from other than God will be shamed" is akin to a frozen state incapable of defeating materialism in the spiritual life and its affairs in real existence. This cannot be considered a spiritual principle unless we confine spiritualism to metaphysics.

This is an Egyptian Oriental outlook that puts the "Ideal" in an embroidered lightweight box that a person carries around in his pocket so that every time he fancies looking at the "Ideal", all he has to do is to open the box, take it out, look at it with admiration, sigh deeply with happiness, and then put the box back in his pocket and carry on wandering. If "spiritual extinction in the unity of existence" is a "High Ideal", then it is nihilistic, destructive and non-existentialist and the corresponding spirit to it is debilitating and ill. It is oriented towards the unseen, which it renders as a stable for existence, and turns away from human existence which it considers a mere bridge to the metaphysical and a means to dissolve in it.

This conception, through which Egyptian literature affirms its Oriental nature, is incongruent with the trajectories of Syrian ethos throughout history. The fact that the Syrians did not consent to this conception only lends further credence to my view, stated elsewhere, that Syria is not an Oriental nation and does not have an Oriental nature.²² If the Syrians had displayed a degree of fondness for "Oriental virtues" that reached them through a concoction of literature from India, Persia and the Arabs, it is only because their outlook on life had deteriorated and their high ideals had disappeared into oblivion under the impact of successive conquests and interruption to the course of social and spiritual life in Syria.

It was this very fact that led Mikha'il Nu'aimeh,²³ ahead of Hussein Heikal, to consider himself an Oriental and to favor the "Oriental" perspective which he claims to declare with Muhammad "There is no victor but God", over the perspective that he claims the West enunciate in the cliché "There is no victor but I". (See Fatawa Kibar, *Al Kuttab Wa Al-Odaba' Fi Mustakbal Al-Lugha Al-Arabiyyah Wa Nahdat Al-Sharq Al-Arabi* [Judgments of Key Writers and Men of Letters on the Future of the Arabic Language and the Revival of the Arab Orient], published in *al-Hilal*, Egypt, 1923.) Nu'aimeh depicted the

²² "Syria is not in the East; it is a Mediterranean nation." (*Suria al-Jadidah*, Sao Paulo, No. 13, 3 June, 1939.

²³ Mikha'il Nu'aimeh (1889 - 1988) was a Lebanese author famous for his spiritual writings, notably *The Book of Mirdad*. He is widely recognized as one of the most important figures in modern Arabic letters and one of the most important spiritual writers of the 20th century.

West as saying "there is no victor but I" by which he intends to contrast the positions of the East and the West from the political and developmental perspectives before all else. Hussein Heikal simply adopted Nu'aimeh's idea in relation to the East and turned it into a high ideal for the Oriental psyche.

Let us explore further Nu'aimeh's train of thought. In his article, which he wrote in response to a survey conducted by *al-Hilal*, he argued that the difference between the Orient and the West is confined to one substantial field:

The East submits to a power stronger than itself and so does not fight it, whereas the West trusts in its power and fights with it relentlessly. The East sees humanity as needing no improvement because it is the creation of the perfect god. The West sees many shortcomings in it and seeks to improve it. The East repeats with Mohammad, "Nothing will afflict us save what Allah has ordained for us", prays with Jesus, "Let Your will be", divests itself from all desires with Buddha, and rises above all earthly matters with Lao-tzu [Laozi] so as to spiritually unite with the Tao, or the Grand Soul (obviously to avoid pain). Conversely, the West maintains, "Let my will be". Should a man fail in his endeavours, he tries over and over again, while continuing to dream of success. When his life comes to an end, he asks his progeny to pursue his ambitions.

In Nu'aimeh's opinion, "A single square mile of the land of a sluggish China contains far more jewels than all the islands of 'advanced' Japan".

If we cast the poetic or literary stylistic embellishments of this passage aside, such words are void of any truth. One finds nothing in it except ignorance of the issues of life and its development since the dawn of humanity as well as ignorance of history and its philosophical tenets. The Orient -most probably for natural reasons - had earlier attempted to "redeem mankind" just as the West would attempt to do later on. It was for this reason that religions were revealed in the Orient, to improve the quality of life for mankind, which they no doubt did in great measure. These same religions, however, were resistant to anything new that was introduced to their dogmas of faith after the revelation of their laws as believers proved reluctant to accept anything new. If Jesus, who is a product of a Syrian environment, sought to discipline souls by the saying, "Let Your will be", He, as such, declared revolt against "what was revealed" when he called for "supplementing the law". Similarly, Mohammad, who was raised in an environment that is far-flung from contemplating the great philosophical issues, voiced the revelation "For each period is a book (revealed)".

Seen in perspective, there is neither in Jesus's nor in the Prophet's tradition any impediment or opposition to the idea of redemption. Moreover, I do not believe that the teachings

of Buddha²⁴ or Lao-tzu²⁵ were originally intended to prevent thinking of ways to “redeem mankind”. Instead, it was the Oriental mentality, which failed to free the spirit of its material shackles through a sound outlook on life and the universe that stopped at the “laws” of the religious philosophies and their hypothetical explanations that draw on “a power greater than them”. Those philosophies gave heterogeneous definitions to such power that made the one Creator “send down” different teachings on human life within existence and before “the extinction in the unity of existence”.

Mikha'il Nu'aimeh chose to talk about "Creation" and its "redemption" to bring the terms to the reader's attention. His style, though, is that of a man of letters, not that of a philosopher or a scholar or an artist. Look at China today. She is abandoning "the spirit" of inertia and taking on the "challenge" of revival. This does not spell an end to the sound precepts in Lao-Tzu's teachings.

No doubt, the psychology of those who submit to the belief that “all that occurs to us is predestined by God” regards this submission as the best and most admirable and cherished of the high ideals. Whether this psychology is

²⁴ A monk mendicant, sage, philosopher and teacher on whose teachings Buddhism was founded. He is believed to have lived and taught mostly in the northeastern part of ancient India sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE.

²⁵ An ancient Chinese philosopher and writer. He is the reputed author of the Tao Te Ching, the founder of philosophical Taoism, and a deity in religious Taoism and traditional Chinese religions.

Eastern or Western, its ultimate fate differs from that of the psychology that accepts nothing less than what “God has predestined” for those who utilize the gifts He had granted them.

Mikhail Nu'aimeh underscored Sufism in one of his speeches in 1932 or 1933 when he said, “Power lies in the weak nations that have dispensed with rearmament (whether forcedly or grudgingly), whereas weakness lies in the nations that are amassing the weapons of war”. This destructive Sufism has been discarded by Syria. It is unlikely that the country will ever attempt to make Sufism a high ideal for itself. However, Sufism may find a fertile soil in Egypt, as is evident in Hussein Heikal's appropriation of his high ideal from Mikhail Nu'aimeh's expression in his comparison between East and West, and from the sayings of others such as Mostafa Saadeq Al-Rafe'ie.²⁶

The prominent writers I have mentioned are not the only ones who are stumbling with the notion of literary revival. Taha Hussein²⁷ himself, who is considered one of Egypt's

²⁶ Mostafa Saadeq Al-Rafe'ie (1880 – May 1937) was an Egyptian poet, born in Tanta, Egypt. His parents were of Syrian origins. Al-Rafe'ie became deaf after contracting typhoid fever. Despite his hearing disability and the fact that he was self-taught, he became one of the most famous Arab poets of the early twentieth century. He composed the words of the Egyptian national anthem “Eslami ya Misr”, adopted between 1923 and 1936. The words of the Tunisian national anthem are largely the work of Al-Rafe'ie.

²⁷ Taha Hussein (1889–1973) was one of the most influential 20th-century Egyptian writers and intellectuals, and a figurehead for The Egyptian Renaissance and the modernist movement in the Middle East and North Africa. His sobriquet was “The Dean of Arabic Literature” (Fr. *doyen des*

most outstanding thinkers and writers, published an article in the November 1933 issue of *al-Hilal* entitled: "Our literary revival and what it lacks". In it, Hussein says that Arabic literature has come a long way but still lacks certain things. He states that the weak points of our "revival" are due to

- Our contact with our ancient literature is still weak and has yet to reach its full potential.
- Our writers' knowledge of foreign literature is still limited.
- Our writers lack enough insight into the old foreign literature that gave rise to modern foreign literature.
- Our writers do not pay enough attention to knowledge or commit themselves to studying many aspects of it.

In Hussein's opinion, if "our writers" could overcome this weakness then our literary revival would fulfil all the conditions necessary for its ascent to the top. In reality, such a discourse lacks depth. It is a ceremonial discourse without essence, as will become clear below.

Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad²⁸ [1889-1964] is another renowned Egyptian writer who responded to the question

lettres arabes). He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature fourteen times.

²⁸ An Egyptian journalist, poet and literary critic, and member of the Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo. More precisely, because "his writings cover a broad spectrum, including poetry, criticism, Islamology,

“Will we ever have world literature?” in the previously mentioned issue of *al-Hilal*. In his answer, Al-Aqqad stated:

World literature is not a sublime rank to which the book and writer are elevated. Rather, it is a condition whose means, if they become available, transpire, and if they do not become available, then it does not transpire.

It appears that the measure of world literature to Al-Aqqad is the spread of books through translation and printing in different languages, not the international value of the literature itself. Therefore, he seeks out the circumstances and practical means that aid in the dissemination of the book, such as its peculiarity to the readership of the translated version, the presence of a translator, the quality of printing, the availability of publishing houses, the percentage of readers, and other such superficial and practical matters. These circumstances and practical means cannot support a world literature for a nation commensurate with the progress of high ideal, thought, and art.

In short, if you combine all the opinions and views stated above, and other similar ones, you will end up with nothing but a confused thought and a muddled emotion that deprive you of comprehending the nature of literature in general, the nature of poetry in particular, and the message of art.

history, philosophy, politics, biography, science, and Arabic literature", he is perceived to be a polymath.

2

Renewal of Life and Renewal of Literature

The principal idea in all the aforementioned examples in the thinking of some of the most leading writers in Arabic literature in contemporary times is this: it is time to cast aside the traditional weeping, wailing, grief, and sorrowful lamentations that have enshrouded classical Arabic poetry and continue to weigh down Egyptian and Syrian poetry to this day. There are, of course, rare exceptions to this trend. These exceptions will not be discussed in this study because they require separate and extensive research. Overall, however, this trend is a negative idea that exhibits a boring and stagnating uniformity. It is also not new to Arabic literature. A long time ago, the Persian poet, Abu Nawas,²⁹ whose cultural environment was Syrian, highlighted this idea in his brilliant and witty style:

*Tell him he who stands weeping over vanished traces,
no harm done had he sat done...*

²⁹ Abu Nawas (756–814) was a classical Arabic poet. Born in the city of Ahvaz in modern-day Iran, to an Arab father and a Persian mother, he became a master of all the contemporary genres of Arabic poetry. See Philip F. Kennedy, *Abu Nawas: A Genius of Poetry*. (OneWorld Press, 2005).

Also,

*The wretched paused to question an abandoned campsite,
While I paused to inquire about the neighbourhood tavern*

Abu Nawas disdained the weeping, wailing, and lamentations over vanished traces because he was born and reared in an environment that differed from the environment of a desert poet.³⁰ He had descended from a people that had experienced a far more exhilarating life than the colorless life of the desert. By grasping this reality, Abu Nawas found the weeping, wailing and lamentation over abandoned ruins to be nothing more than a comical inadequacy. He then put forward his idea that surpasses the ideas of all the present-day writers who call for “renewal”. Indeed, despite their best efforts, the literati of the present era have not been able to add anything substantial to Abu Nawas’s idea.

The best that Amin al-Rihani could come up with is that a poet should be a “mirror of society”. Likewise, Hussein Heikal's highest personal effort is that poetry renewal requires "the poet or writer to develop a certain feeling for

³⁰ Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, the author of *The History of Baghdad*, wrote that Abu Nuwas was buried in Shunizi cemetery in Baghdad. The city has several places named for the poet. Abu Nuwas Street runs along the east bank of the Tigris that was once the city’s showpiece.

the spirit of the era in which he lives and to express it in a genuine way that represents the characteristic features of that era". As for Khalil Mutran, his effort led him to the conclusion: "I want our poetry to be an honest mirror of our era in all its different stages of development". This is the highest level of thinking that Syrian and Egyptian writers have achieved to this day. However, if this is the ultimate aim of poets and poetry, then there is no need for a discourse on renovation and discarding imitation since it is already an accomplished fact.

The writers and poets of the present era have produced literature that represents their era with utmost sincerity. They do not need to change their style to do that anymore, as Khalil Mutran deems and as Hussein Heikal has suggested in an intellectual stumble on how to extricate literature and fine art from its present state. Was not the era in Syria, until the birth pangs of the social national renaissance, one of stagnation, fear, imitation and torpidity? Was not the era in Egypt one of Eastern imitation and Western regurgitation? Indeed, they were. Therefore, the literati in Syria and Egypt are the exact "mirrors of their societies", and the true representatives of their era, and the material deemed necessary by proponents of literary renewal, whose discourses on the subject run into hundreds of pages and volumes, has been obtained. Despite this, the need for renewal or change is still there, intensifying, and the desire for a new direction is also growing by the day. So, how do we explain this irony and contradiction? The answer is that it came about because the literati who investigated the

question of literary renewal strayed from the subject and its fundamental themes and focused on issues that had nothing to do with literature.

Take Hussein Heikal's discourse on the "era" in which a poet lives: it is based more on his conversance with French literature than on an assessment of conditions in Egypt. Likewise, Amin al-Rihani seems to regard mirroring the spirit of the group (or society) as a superficial exercise based on deception and hypocrisy. This is equivalent to a Syrian poet representing the psyche of his people and its spiritual conditions by borrowing or regurgitating from the literature of Shakespeare or Goethe, both of who represent the literary outlook of other peoples [or nations]. As a result, the poet conveys a distorted image of his own people. This is something that many Egyptian and some Syrian writers often do with skewed results. As for Khalil Mutran, who is well-versed in French literature, he seems to forget that the era in Europe is one thing and the era in Syria and Egypt is another. He is also oblivious to the conditions in which the Syrian and Egyptian peoples live, and he treats them as though they were on a par with European peoples. As a result, his discourse creates the impression that only the literati in Egypt and Syria have lagged behind the times. Of course, this is not true.

What should we expect from a poet, especially one who is expected to be, as the exponents of "renewal" put it, a mirror of society or the era? What should we expect of a poet who was born in an environment beset by ignorance and

engulfed with debasement and subjugation, whose eyes first met the darkness of chaos, uncertainty, and indulgence in material follies, and who was brought up amid signs of impotence and repentance, ideals of lust, archetypes of material beauty, and tendencies of biological instincts? Do we expect him to follow anything other than the principles that made him and the examples of literature that reached him? No, never!

As an industry, literature (prose and poetry) is meant to highlight thought and emotion with the utmost finesse and the most sophisticated beauty. It cannot, of its own, affect renewal. For literature is neither thought nor emotion. Therefore, I believe that renewal in literature is an effect not a cause. It is an effect of innovation or change in thought and emotion, in life, and in the outlook on life, and an outcome of a spiritual-materialistic, social and political revolution that changes the life of the whole nation and the conditions of its life, and opens new horizons for thought and emotions, and their ways and aspects.

Literary historians and researchers into the elements and characteristics of literature have noted that political changes and revolutions often lead to changes in literature and in the styles and methods of literary production. They contend that these changes or revivals either lead to literary revival or play a crucial part in changing the course of literature. As I see it, however, political changes are not in themselves the principal agent or factor in changing the course of literature because, as far as I am concerned, political events are the

result of early signs of change in the outlook on life or in the development of new beliefs and new material-spiritual ideals among a given people. This change propels people to contrive alternative methods to realize its objectives. One of those methods is the art of politics in all its forms and manifestations. Politics is more like literature. Where there are no new thoughts or emotions in politics, there is no new politics. Likewise, in literature, where there is no new thought or emotion in life, a revival in literature or the arts is out of the question.

The quest for new strategies to revive Syrian and Egyptian literature reminds me of a similar quest for ways to improve the art of acting in Syria. A few years ago, a big fan of theatre asked me how acting in Syria could be developed and perfected. I told him that the matter is entirely dependent on improving the lifestyle of the people. For acting the roles of love, gallantry, and heroism in a highly advanced and professional manner requires an equivalent level of advanced and professional feeling of these characteristics. [I explained] that it is hard for those who have experienced only the physical aspects of love to deliver a good performance of its sublime psychological features.

Some time ago, I watched a stage actor in Damascus. He was a well-educated young man playing the role of a man who wanted the woman he just met to love him and to know that he loves her. His performance did not live up to expectations because it lacked the right emotions and expression. Another actor had to play the role of a father

ready to reunite with his daughter after he had been separated from her and was presumed dead. When it was time for the reunion with his daughter, and when the girl playing the role of the daughter appeared, all attempts failed to have the father's arms stretch out far enough to embrace the girl and caress her gently. The actor could not convey the emotions he was supposed to convey. In the end, the femininity of the part proved far more powerful and affective on the man than that of the scene of father and daughter he was playing. I am certain, however, that he would have managed a better performance if he had been brought up in a different way.

Writers, poets, and actors are products of their environment. They are greatly influenced by the environment and by the prevailing state of social-economic-spiritual conditions. Only the creative artist and the philosopher are capable of breaking the barriers of time and space, of mapping out a new life, and of developing amazing, high ideals for a whole nation. A writer whose work is limited to literature and abstract thinking cannot perform such tasks. Likewise, a poet whose task is to produce a mirror image of the condition of his community or era is not the person whom one can expect to set up a new condition for his nation or era. This task is for the mentor-philosopher-artist-leader who can envisage a new history for his nation and lay the foundations of a new era for his people. Such a person has the privilege to be a literary poet if he so wishes but does not have to. In the same way, a poet may be a leader-artist-philosopher-mentor but does not have to.

It is unfair to ask a poet to represent his age or his society in the same way that a historian or a sociologist would. What al-Rihani, Khalil Mutran and Hussein Heikal have said is unfair for poets as it expects them to be what they are not. Perhaps some poetry may contain some indications about the conditions of their ages and the ideas and beliefs that prevailed therein. It is not, however, imperative for a poet to study his age when attempting to compose a poem about an idea, a sentiment, a virtue, or an incident. When a poet composes a poem without thinking about his era or about other eras, the poem usually turns out to be most representative of the era and its literature. That is why I said that our poets represent our age in a most faithful way.

By “our age”, I mean the age in which Syria is living, not the age in which Britain or Germany or France or Russia live. In my opinion our present era is different from that of those nations even though the time is one. Syria's psychological-political-social condition differs from that of those nations: it is as though she is living in a completely different age from them. That is why the works of her poets cannot be on a par with the era of the most developed European nations. While those nations are producing great revolutions in sociology, economics, politics, science and philosophy, Syria is still trudging in the darkness of her dramatic recent history. She is oblivious to the philosophy of her myths, to her ancient social, economic, and political revolutions that once illuminated the whole world, and to her reforms that set examples for Athens and Rome.

To me, as I have stated previously, a poet is someone who is concerned with highlighting the most esteemed and the most beautiful in every realm of thought, feelings or matter. One of the most important characteristics of poetry is the highlighting of feelings, emotions and sensations in every thought or every cause that encompasses the elements of the soul, and giving those feelings, sensations and emotions figurative or creative images. These figurative or creative images must have the elements of strength, beauty, and sublimation without parting company with the truth and the human goal. I reiterate that poetry is not the intellect itself, without denying the poet the right to express partial or total ideas whenever he can.

Contrary to the expressed opinions of some of our writers and poets, poetry is not merely a sentiment to me. I find poetry, or at least the poetry of the sublime idealistic type, closely connected to the intellect even when sentiment is its basic element or purpose. This is because human sentiment itself is joined closely to thought in the amazing complex that we call the soul. I also believe, largely, that what applies to poetry also applies to music. I demonstrated this through the hero of a novella I wrote in 1930. Entitled *Fajj'at Hubb* [*A Love Tragedy*] the novella was subsequently published in Beirut in 1931 together with another novella called *Eid Sayyidat Saydnaya* [*the Feast of Saint Saydnaya*].³¹ The

³¹ Antun Sa'adeh, *Qissatan* (Two Novellas). Translated by Adel Beshara. (Phoenix Publishing, 2011)

analogy between poetry and music in *Fajl'at Hubb* appears in the form of a dialogue and a narrative description:

During a gathering of friends one day, Salim, the friends and I began to talk about every kind of discipline and art until we finally took up the topic of music. Some of the people present had only heard the common oriental tunes that they mistakenly call “Arabic tunes”. If they had heard some western melodies, they were either unsympathetic toward them or had not attempted to understand them. Others had heard both oriental tunes and western melodies and had become aware of the artistic and aesthetic aspects that lie in both types. These people preferred the western melodies to the oriental tunes. They thought that the former were loftier and richer in their way of expressing sentiments and that the latter were poorer and unable to go beyond expressing preliminary states.

Others at the gathering had become fanatical about the oriental tunes. Perhaps their fanaticism came from an immature, unclear sense of national feeling and a conservative desire to maintain the traditional tunes. This is only natural as those who are only able to understand a single musical tune would surely prefer it to other tunes and melodies.

As a result, a debate between both sides flared up. It dragged on and on and escalated until I became afraid that

it might lead to repulsion and grudges. This often is the case with us, Syrians, even until the present-day. We rarely get into a discussion for the purpose of expanding our knowledge and understanding and discovering the difference between right and wrong. Fortunately, the debating sides decided to ask Salim for his opinion since he was an expert on both types of music, eastern and western, and a lover of justice and truth.

Salim turned to one of the conservative, eastern music fanatics called Baheej.

“Do you know, my friend, why music was created?” asked Salim.

Baheej answered confidently, “Yes, music was created to be the language of the sentiments”.

Salim retorted, “If you were an expert on music, you would not have assuredly pronounced such a judgment that cuts music short of at least two-thirds of its advantages”.

Four people cried in one voice, “Two-thirds?!”.

Salim answered, “Yes, two-thirds”.

Baheej then rejoined, “How do you define it then?”.

Salim answered, “I define it, first, by setting it free from all definitions. You can identify many of the advantages of music, but you can never put a ceiling on them. Music is not the language of the sentiments only. It is also the language of thought and understanding. It is

the language of human nature with all its outside aspects and inside secrets. You may say if you wish that music deals with preliminary sentiments, psychological conditions of various sides, poetry, literature and philosophy. From this angle, you cannot define music into only two types: eastern and western. You may, however, distinguish between an oriental style and a western style in expressing psychological meanings with the aid of music. You can also distinguish between types in these meanings. Whenever western music expresses the same sentiments and psychological conditions that eastern music reflects, you can easily understand it, notwithstanding a difference in style. It, therefore, becomes evident that the difference between what you call oriental or Arabic music and western music is not, in fact, part of the essence of music, for there has never been such a feud. The difference lies in the *intended* expression of the meanings by the Easterners and the Westerners and the styles handled by both to reach that end.

“The difference that you spot between the style of oriental music and its western counterpart is but a mere variation which reflects special psychological attitudes. You can find solid evidence of the truth of this opinion in natural and psychological sciences and their branches. These sciences prove, beyond a shred of doubt, that human nature is one in all nations and ethnicities. Sentiments of love, hatred, tenderness, cruelty, happiness, sadness and things that drive one to delight, contemplation, playfulness, thinking, in addition to

persuasion as well as resulting agitation, excitement and psychological visualizations that words cannot describe – all these are one in all nations, east or west. There is no difference except to a limited extent, which reveals the degree of the nobleness of human nature, its sensitivity, languidness, depravity or insensitivity. A people whose natures are still in their rudimentary phases or who have been locked-up behind threadbare traditions and conventions resulting from these very same natures will surely have rudimentary music. Their music, in that case, would only express those sentiments that human beings and animals have in common, such as lust, which represents the majority of the sentiments that overcome these people.

“Conversely, the music of people whose souls have been liberated and elevated expresses emotions that soar far above sexual desire and visualizations that surpass lowly animalistic purposes. Their aims in life are no longer limited to getting together with the beloved. Rather, they have a far loftier aim, an aim that love lifts their souls to reach and motivates them to achieve, generating in them elevated sentiments and great ideas and visualizations that cannot be understood by those whose sole concern in life is to get together with the beloved.

“These are the sentiments, visualizations and ideas expressed in the music of composers like Beethoven. Beethoven reached the status of an idol in artistic music because the music that he composed reflected the most

sublime levels that human nature could possibly aspire to in life. He sensed all the sentiments, expectations and inclinations of all his fellow human beings. It was as if his soul contained everyone's souls. This is the trait of any genius, whether a poet or a man of letters. Think of what the music of this immortal composer reflects. For instance, Beethoven's Seventh Symphony was his response to the firing cannons of Napoleon. He changed the cannons into a stream of human emotions demanding liberty in rebellion against injustice and tyranny. This music remains alive today and will live forever. Consider also Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in which he expresses the conflict between factors of demise and factors of survival, between life and death.

"The music of other immortal composers does not solely lift the emotions of the soul to ranks of loftiness. It aims to elevate ideas and create mental visualizations as well. No, my friend, music was not created to be merely the language of rudimentary emotions, like our traditional music. Rather, music is the language of the soul with all its sentiments and ideas".

The men all listened attentively while Salim spoke. They had never heard anyone speak like that. After a few moments of silence during which it was evident that they were trying hard to make sense of what Salim had just said and attempting to grasp the broad horizon he had reached, Baheej asked, "What do you think of our music, then?".

Salim answered, “Actually, my friend, no music can be regarded as the reflection of the nature of us Syrians. We have special advantages. Music that is common among us is not, with the exception of special popular melodies, induced by our own nature. Instead, the music is a mix of the natures of different nations. It may indeed express a small part of our sentiments and emotions. Yet it still falls short of encompassing all of the sentiments that lie in the bottom of our souls. Those sentiments comprise all the psychological influences and factors, not to mention the ideas and visualizations that lie inside our minds and which truly reflect our traits and talents. The tunes that we listen to every day have not emerged from our souls but rather have entered our traditions and conventions. They are merely traditional tunes”.

Baheej: “You prefer western music then?”.

Salim replied, “I have already said that there are no preferences in music. However, if you want to know my opinion on the difference between our view of music and the view of the Westerners, I would say, in all honesty, that nations of the East – with the exceptions of the Russians, if indeed they can be regarded as Easterners – have all swerved from the correct musical bases in favor of topical tunes. Or they have limited themselves to a range of melodies for which they can find no other alternative. This was previously the case with the nations of the West as well. However, when the minds and souls of Western people experienced psychological elevation,

their music had to change to match that elevation in order to represent the new ideas and sentiments faithfully. Westerners realized this before the people in the east and so they drastically developed their music. They switched from melodies to mere sounds, which represent the foundations of music, and then organized these sounds and introduced literature, philosophy and poetry into music. By doing this, they succeeded in reflecting the sublime human nature in their music.

“This should take place in Syria and in every state where people have active souls and minds. Old, borrowed conventions have tied our souls with the shackles of rudimentary tunes that have become a stumbling block between psychological elevation and us. These melodies do not express something far nobler in our nature and our souls, something far loftier than desires and basic sentiments. Emotional ideas and comprehensions exist inside our souls that address the in-depth contemplation of life and a strong urge to improve it from numerous facets (social, national, spiritual, humanistic). These ideas and comprehensions propel us towards a higher aim that befits our existence, the achievement of which needs different types of music. The borrowed melodies composed for limited and specific psychological conditions such as grief or passionate infatuation are insufficient. Music composed for these conditions is not adequate to express a completely different condition such as those of outrage and mutiny against tyranny and injustice or of contemplation. In fact, melodies composed

for specific psychological states nearly two thousand years ago cannot possibly express the same state today. During the intervening centuries the experiences of the human nature have elevated its sensations and have imparted to the intended psychological state new meanings whose expression demands new melodies. Therefore, if we wish to lead a noble life that brings us closer to happiness, we ought to liberate our souls from the shackles of traditional melodies that foster inferior sentiments. We ought to go back to basic sounds and let our emotional ideas and comprehension work on them so we can create good music that will nourish all our emotions and visualizations, music that will reveal the strength and beauty of our nature”.

When Salim concluded, I turned to the others and found Baheej and his mates contemplating these new ideas they had never heard of before. One of them looked at me and asked, “What do you think of what Salim is saying, Mr. A.?”

I answered, “I agree to everything he has said and I believe his opinion on music applies to literature, too. For example, look at how our poets describe sharpening swords in their verses. Sharpening swords is not part of the lifestyle and civilization of our people. They only imitate classical poets. Also, look at how our writers write about barren deserts and flatlands even though our country is mountainous and green. Imitation has blinded their eyes to reality. I think we will need to exert a

strenuous effort if the literary renaissance is to become expressive of our national life. But I am certain that there will come a day when this will be achieved, a day when the Syrian mind and soul, rich in natural inborn talents, will become an abundant resource for men of letters, artists, scholars and philosophers who will all emerge from the very heart of Syria”.

After a short period of silence, we left the group. Salim’s words sank deep in my mind and, as the days passed, they sank even deeper.

The preceding dialogue reveals the spirit of renovation that filled the life of my friend Salim and its desire to cover an entire era and nation. Salim had begun to compose a symphony marking the end of the era of indolence and the dawn of the awakening of the Syrian nation. For the sake of honesty, I should point out that Salim used to believe that the revival of the Syrian nation was necessary for civilization because he felt sure that the concepts of liberty, peace and love were deeply rooted in his people. Salim did not pursue any political gains but something far loftier and more beneficial than political objectives. He believed that a political surge was pointless if not based on a strong soul firmly supported inside every person – male and female - by a living literature and an artistic music that unite the sentiments and rally them around a single, lofty aim until they arrive at a unified social faith based on love. This love, if it were to triumph in the souls of an entire people, would generate sincere

cooperation and a beautiful warmth that saturates life with hope and vitality. Only then does a political struggle become productive. Patriotic action founded on outmoded and reactionary conventions, on the other hand, remains sterile even if it leads to political liberty.

Eleven years later, I look back at that assessment of the state of music and literature in our environment and the kind of spirit that permeates our people - a spirit that came down to us from the eras of disintegration under the weight of barbaric invasions and the currents of Oriental psychology. I feel that I succeeded in portraying the state of confusion in the field of art and literary production that prevailed in our enlightened circles and offered a practical solution and a way out from that state. I also feel that the analysis presented in the novella [*Faji'at Hubb*] is still applicable to the current literary and intellectual struggles [in Syria] and the [quest for renewal] in poetry. As for the analogy between music and poetry articulated in *Faji'at Hubb*, which I still strongly endorse, it is conceptually quite different from the analogy made by Shafiq Ma'luf who wrote:

Poetry, to me, is a pulsating emotion that reflects to people their own inner nature. In many cases, its value does not exceed the pleasure that one obtains upon listening to a good piece of music, be it enrapturing or melancholic.

This analogy between poetry and music elevates neither poetry nor music. It does not accord them the lofty position they occupy in a soul that has broken free from the narrow

restraints of thought and sentiment and achieved an exalted state. In many ways, it appertains to the traditional outlook on life and art, and it is a product of the environment and type of culture that define the role of poetry and music in the poorest terms.

Earlier in this study, I gave a candid opinion about the weakness in Shafiq Ma'luf's exposé on poetry. I was brief and only analyzed his observation that the poet "depicts to people the souls of people". It is necessary to complete this analysis in order to obtain a more reliable and accurate evaluation. Starting with the "depiction of souls", I would maintain that such a "depiction" could not occur through "a pulsating feeling". If it were to happen, it would be a disfigured and deficient depiction, to say the least. It would most probably be a depiction of the poet's feelings, in proportion with his awareness, of the souls of people. This depiction may be perfect or it may be lacking. In any case, a description based on feelings alone is purely subjective and quite narrow because it would be restricted to the poet's soul and would not be able to describe the souls of people as they are or their inner desires for what they wish to be.

Moreover, describing the souls as they are requires substantial knowledge in the rigorous science of psychology, sociology and the intellect, which must keep pace with feelings or surpass or lead them along this rugged course. It is improper for the poet to focus on and describe people's souls through the "pulsating feeling", because it implies letting himself go with his natural disposition rather than closely studying the subtleties of the soul and the issues

affecting it. The poet, in general, is not required to describe souls to be a poet. He may describe the elements of nature or some of them, a natural phenomenon, military events, or other things, and still be a poet. As to the poet who “depicts the souls of people” and is interested in psychological issues, he is not just any poet or every poet; rather, he is a poet of peculiar qualities and a unique standing. Likewise is the poet who tackles philosophical issues, whether existential or metaphysical.

Khalil Mutran is a true poet without needing to delve into psychological issues. Perhaps he is at his weakest when he delves into such issues. His poem “Nero” is a timeless piece of poetry.³² In it, Mutran rose above his age (in Syria and Egypt) and all the preceding ages of Arabic literature. Perhaps the weakest parts of this poem are those related to

³² That people which bestowed victory upon Nero
is more deserving of shame than he.
What was that Nero whom they worshipped?
He was coarse and ignorant,
A dwarf whom they raised on high.
They crawled before him and he grew in arrogance.
They glorified him and extended his shadow
until it filled the earth with crime.
They gave him of their power, so he
became a tyrant over them, and worse.

The ruler oppresses only when he has no fear
of the ruled revolting.
Some denounce Nero, But I, the nation;
had it defied him, retreat would have been his lot.
every nation creates its own Nero,
be he called "Caesar" or "Cyrus".

psychological issues. Shafiq Ma'luf is a poet in *al-Ahlam* and yet he did not have to depict the souls of people in it. He is also a poet in "Abqar", which contains few, if any, images and descriptions of psychological issues. Moreover, we do not find in "Abqar" the "pulsating feeling" that we find in *al-Ahlam* except in special stanzas whose biological tendencies point to psychological immaturity.

The terms of reference that defined the concept of poetry for Shafiq Ma'luf also defined the notion of the sublimity of music or its depth for him. The simile he made that the benefit of poetry "does not exceed" the benefit of listening to a beautiful piece of music "whether it is euphonic or melancholic" made him see no aspects in music but euphony and melancholy. However, this is an instance of a limited, narrow and a rudimentary form of music, one that is based on a naive and static outlook on life, unfit for psychological refinement and the glory of the eternal sublime ideal. Euphony and melancholy alone are a supplementary part of a life that is dearth in psychological culture, in art and in spiritual aspects.

As noted earlier, from the extract cited from my novella *A Love Tragedy*, the benefit of music is not limited to euphony and melancholy except where music has frozen at these two primitive states because of the stagnation of physical and spiritual life in the environment. Sublime music incites intellectual meditations and spiritual convulsions in the soul, not to mention its effect on the different individual emotions that are part of the biological or sensual affairs of life. However, such music was the product of a refined age or the

brainchild of a creative imagination that was able to betray a world of thoughts, reflections and feelings in waves of tunes and melodies, which, in turn, require an age that could understand them. Such a creative imagination is an ingenuity that should be left to the musical genius alone.

Let me explain this theory: Wagner was, indisputably, a musical genius.³³ His music belongs to a unique category. However, it is connected very closely to a sense of life inspired by the Germanic legends and the psychological and philosophical subjects inherent in the lives of the heroes of those legends. Wagner's feelings are drawn from the German *weltanschauung*.³⁴ He did not create this *weltanschauung* or devise the Germanic legends [on which it is based]. But he was a

³³ Richard Wagner (1813 –1883) was a German composer, theatre director, polemicist, and conductor who is chiefly known for his operas (or, as some of his later works were later known, "music dramas"). Unlike most opera composers, Wagner wrote both the libretto and the music for each of his stage works. Initially establishing his reputation as a composer of works in the romantic vein of Carl Maria von Weber and Giacomo Meyerbeer, Wagner revolutionised opera through his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total work of art"), by which he sought to synthesise the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts, with music subsidiary to drama. He described this vision in a series of essays published between 1849 and 1852. Wagner realised these ideas most fully in the first half of the four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung). See Lucy Beckett, *Richard Wagner: Parsifal*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

³⁴ A German word that literally means "world view"; it combines *Welt* ("world") with *Anschauung* ("view"), which ultimately derives from the Middle High German verb *schouwen* ("to look at" or "to see"). Briefly, a *Weltanschauung* is a comprehensive conception or theory of the world and the place of humanity within it. It is an intellectual construct that provides both a unified method of analysis for and a set of solutions to the problems of existence.

creator of the leitmotifs and musical waves that give expression to that *weltanschauung* and the diverse philosophical feelings that he felt when he read those legends and understood from them (and from the ascendancy of his people) the national characteristics and essential identity that allowed him to see and highlight high philosophical ideals, which we can see performed and hear it arias and recitatives in “Die Walküre”, “Siegfried”, “Das Rheingold” “Tannhäuser”, “Lohengrin”, “Die Meistersinger”, “Tristan und Isolde”, etc. [ed. note: the names of Wagner’s operas are not normally translated and thus must be in German]. Wagner was an epic poet because he composed the libretti of his musical epics. He was an epic philosophical musician too because he composed the tunes and melodies of those eternal epics with their emotional and intellectual *leitmotifs*, which represent a highly elevated outlook on life. It is difficult for the intellectual scholar to imagine Wagner’s achievements detached from his association with the annals of the German psyche and the influence of a sublime outlook on life and a profound feeling of its issues, and from the fact that he grew up under the effect of the same psychological elements that led Germany along its upward course.

If the literati of this forlorn Syrian age were to go to an opera house and listen to an opera composed by Wagner, would they find it palatable to their taste or would they find it euphonic or melancholic? I am confident that they would find it terribly insipid. They would not understand the music or its inspirational value and *leitmotifs*. After all, only a little by way of euphony and melancholy is present in Wagner’s

musical poems. However, they have many more intellectual reflections and philosophical tendencies, which cannot be followed by a listener looking for euphony and melancholy and who regards music purely as an expression of euphony and melancholy in a wretched realm of life where the biological disposition clearly prevails over that of the psychological.

The function of Wagner's compositions is not confined to creating elation, delight, or melancholy, whether physically sentimental or biologically psychological. Rather, they transcend all that to the fundamental issues that the complex, lofty human soul encounters, with all the thoughts, feelings, aspirations, tendencies and ideals it consists of, and the violent struggle it must endure, covertly or overtly, between the beautiful and the ugly, the superior and the inferior, the noble and the ignoble. In this case, the reaction of the literati from a stagnant and lethargic Syria to the music of Beethoven, Bach, Mussorgsky, Weber, Bruckner, Tchaikovsky, Verdi, Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky, Chopin, Berlioz, Debussy, Sibelius, Dvořák, Schubert, or others, is unlikely to be anything but one of astonishment or disapproval.

A few years ago, in São Paulo, Brazil, I heard a Syrian journalist who considered himself a great man of letters saying that he had gone to the Municipal Theatre of the said city to hear one of Beethoven's famous symphonies. He was seated only a short while until he could no longer bear to listen and got up to leave, astonished at the idiocy of those able to sit without boredom, for an hour or more, listening

to music devoid of euphony and melancholy. Our "great man of letters" grew so weary of listening to the humming of strings, brass, wind instruments and percussion, that in order to relieve his distress, he asked the Syrian in whose office he was telling this story, to play some of Umm Kalthum's³⁵ sentimental and euphoric songs! Nor did he stop there, but called out to a friend of his who was passing by, "Come in. Let's lose ourselves in this singing", not realizing that he had spoken the very truth with this phrase, by which he had meant something quite different!

Although poetry is a narrower field than music for expressing what the human soul embodies in thoughts, expectations, feelings and tendencies, the definition that Shafiq Ma'luf gave to music and its benefit rendered poetry itself, in comparison, an even narrower field and shallower than what it is or what it could be. This occurred after the poet had developed a higher perception of individual and social life, loftier demands for the beauty of the soul, and a more precise sense of the purposes of existence and its essence that lies firmly in the soul within existence and not prior or post-existence. In line with my Syrian temperament, I believe that the essence of the soul lies in existence and for the sake of existence, regardless of the nature of this existence

³⁵ Umm Kulthum (1898 - 1975) was an Egyptian singer, songwriter, and film actress active from the 1920s to the 1970s. She was given the honorific title *Kawkab A Sharq* ("Planet of the East") for her vocal ability and style. See Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

in itself and whatever its problem might be, and not for the sake of “extinction” in the “unity of existence”.

I do not think that Syrian or any other poet can rise to this level by reading the Book of Isaiah from the Jewish Torah or by reconnecting with the "old literature", which is an ambiguous expression in itself. He cannot rise to this level by mastering classical foreign literature or by ornamenting books and perfecting their print design and layout. Rather, this level is achieved by connecting to a course of life wherein the poet discovers not only himself, but also his nation, his society, his true nature, and the nature of his people and their talents, and by coming to grips with the depth of the outlook on life, the universe and the art associated with this course, which is growing stronger by the day.

From Darkness to Light

After the appearance of the Syrian Social National Party and the extensive trials that took place to determine the significance of its doctrine and social national teachings, which usher in a new era and a new history and translate into a new outlook on life, universe, and art; and after the magnitude of the Party's task became evident, al-Amin George Abdul Massih, a member of the Supreme Council, an eloquent speaker, administrator and writer, and one of the most faithful and intrepid members of the Party, said to me,

Had I been a Nationalist prior to commencing my final studies, I would have gained a great deal more from my studies; I would have known how and what to study – and I believe I speak for others as well.

Abdul Massih was a student of economics at the American University of Beirut. He was in his senior year when he embraced the social national idea, but he did not grasp the importance and gravity of this idea and its long-term objectives and issues until it had come a long way and matured through experimentation and clarifications and had addressed the issues that stood in the way of its evolution and growth. Precluded from studying the new teachings of the

movement because of his pre-occupation with academic studies, Abdul Massih completed his degree based on a non-national individualistic outlook that promotes an ethos of an unbounded individual success and total indifference to everything else. However, after spending some time in the movement, he began to recall and scrutinize some of the views he had studied and to understand them differently and more fully. He was not the only one who felt this way.

Al-Amin¹ Fakhri Ma'luf² gave up his obsession with astronomy after I shouted out: "You spend your time studying the stars while you know not who will possess the land under your feet tomorrow?". After he had developed a sufficiently firm grasp of the social national idea, he said to me: "We now understand your articles in *al-Majallah*". He was referring to the articles I wrote for *al-Majallah*, a magazine that had resumed its publication in Beirut in 1933. Only four issues were published before I had to suspend the magazine in order to focus on organizing the national movement. Every

¹ A rank in the Syrian Social National Party literally meaning "Trustee". The rank is granted to party members who display outstanding leadership and ideological awareness of the Party's Aim and Cause.

² Born in the town of Mashrah, Lebanon, Fakhri graduated from the American University of Beirut with a Bachelor's Degree in mathematics in 1934 and from 1934 to 1939 taught physics at that same University. In 1939, he moved to the United States to attend the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he received first an M.A. and, in 1942, a Ph.D. in philosophy. After receiving his Ph.D., he continued post-graduate studies at Harvard University and Saint Bonaventure University. From 1942 to 1945, Dr. Maluf taught mathematics and science at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts. From 1945 to 1949, he taught philosophy, theology, and mathematics at Boston College.

aspect of this movement required extremely close attention to details, as there were no suitable administrative, social, political, cultural, constitutional, or moral precedents to draw upon for a movement of a new kind.

I heard similar words from others as well. Ma'luf even changed the course of his studies. He studied economics and politics while he taught at the university, and then he switched to philosophy and specialized in it. In the light of the social national revival, he was able to determine what and how to study (unfortunately, he has recently exhibited an apparent psychological tendency for metaphysical and theological issues). The gravity of the principles of this revival likewise materialized in the studies of those who realized its gravity and felt the greatness of its reality while they were starting their final studies or were already in their final phase. All of them, as well as those whom the social national teachings have refined and sharpened their awareness and revived their talents, are now prominent ideological forces in this movement, which is resurrecting a great nation from its slumber.

In the middle of 1935, a few months before I was arrested along with my aides-de-camp in the Syrian Social National movement, a poet joined the movement. His name was starting to gain currency in the literary circles of Syria, particularly in Lebanon. This poet was Said Aql, the composer of the epic "Bint Yiftah".

I happened on a copy of that poetic narrative. After reading a few passages, I sensed an excellent poetic ability worthy of addressing the affairs of life and the soul. However,

I could not bear to finish reading it because I found its subject alien to Syrian culture as it was confined to Jews, the enemies of Syria. I detected the faculty of a Syrian poet that was worthy of expressing the Syrian personality, but was alien to Syrian themes and the orientations of the Syrian ethos. It also served certain trends and ideals (the victory of which would mean the defeat of Syria and its Higher Ideals, ambitions and powers). Despite the poetic ability manifested in the epic poem, I could find nothing that might open a new avenue for Syrian literature and effect change or innovation that would put Syria on a par with nations that possess dynamic literature worthy of life and universal standing.

I found in “Bint Yiftah” (Jephthah's Daughter)³ a manifestation of the “Literature of Books”, which I discussed in an article entitled “The Literature of Books and the Literature of Life” that I published in *al-Majallah* in Beirut

³ Jephthah appears in the Book of Judges as a judge who presided over Israel for a period of six years (Judges 12:7). According to Judges, he lived in Gilead. His father's name is also given as Gilead, and, as his mother is described as a prostitute, this may indicate that his father might have been any of the men of that area. Jephthah led the Israelites in battle against Ammon and, in exchange for defeating the Ammonites, made a vow to sacrifice whatever would come out of the door of his house first. When his daughter was the first to come out of the house, he immediately regretted the vow, which would require him to sacrifice his daughter to God. Jephthah then carried out his vow, though some commentators have disputed as to whether or not the sacrifice was actually carried out. Traditionally, Jephthah is listed among major judges because of the length of the biblical narrative referring to him, but his story also shares features with those of the minor judges, such as his short tenure—only six years—in office. See Bernard P. Robinson, “The Story of Jephthah and his Daughter: Then and Now.” (*Biblica*, Vol. 85, No. 3, 2004): 331-348

under an alias. My intention in the article was to show that we need a “literature of life” that can understand our life, accompany us in our development and express our ideals and hopes that stem from the nature of our people and its temperament, history, psychological make-up and the essential elements of its life. These are among the major issues that occupied a greater part of my thinking on national revival and its causes. I realized that it is not possible to predicate literature on these issues except through a new outlook on life, universe and art that embodies and elevates our high ideals and represents our wishes in a comprehensive, philosophical ideology that encompasses our whole society and its fundamental material-spiritual issues (whether they are social, economic, psychological, political, or artistic). I had expressed this opinion in a different way at the end of my explanation of the principles of the SSNP:

The aim of the Syrian Social National Party is an all-embracing one directed towards the examination of the foundations of national life in all its aspects, of the basic issues of the Social Nationalist society: economic, social, political, spiritual, moral, and of the final lofty ends of existence. It also comprises the national ideals, the objective of independence and the establishment of a healthy nationalist society. This in turn implies a new intellectual ethical outlook and a new theory of values.

With this outlook, I saw the possibility of establishing a new literature comprising all the elements of innovation and the

impulses of revival. The literature that serves this purpose or any similar purpose is the "literature of life", which I suggested. This literature betrays the grandeur of vital psychological aspirations and the loftiness of their aims, whose mission is to be "a beacon of light for groups" instead of "a mirror for them". It is the literature of geniuses and pundits who, if some had missed out being founders of the new philosophy and outlook on life, would not fail to see the 'High Ideal' they encompass and the new ethos they entail. They would thus engage the new outlook on life, universe and art and utilize it to make beautiful immortal literature, because it would embody elements of a new life with its outlook, philosophy and desires. This literature will then amount to a literary revival commensurate with the political revival that, in turn, would be founded on the existence of the new philosophic outlook on human life and its elements and ultimate objects.

"Bint Yiftah" did not conform to the goal of spiritual renewal in Syria and the expectations of the new literature that Syria so internally yearns for, because it was out of range with the central themes of Syrian life and unconnected to a philosophic outlook capable of absorbing the currents of Syrian ethos. Therefore, its theme did not appeal to me. Its aesthetic images remained alien and rigid, even though they betray a Syrian sentiment within events of an alien setting at variance with the trajectory of Syrian emotions. Consequently, I decided to draw the poet's attention to the demands of Syrian revival in literature, which I did in 1936 during a visit to the executive branch of the Syrian National

Party in the northern Bekaa city of Zahle, soon after my second release from detention. The Zahle division of the Party had become a playground for malicious propaganda during my long absence in prison over two successive terms separated by a brief period. The Communist propaganda machine had started to meddle with some of our comrades, including Said Aql. I found him almost persuaded that there was no need for a social national revival in Syria since the world, as some communists had told him, was on the verge of a conflict between communism and capitalism and that whichever of them wins will destroy any hope that Syria has of achieving its resurrection.

Therefore, I first explained to these ditherers the degree of danger that their ideological vacillation, like leaves constantly strewn by the wind, posed to their society and themselves. Towards the end of my discourse, I turned to Said Aql and praised his excellent poetic ability, but scolded him for being inattentive to topics that were deeply rooted in the heart and history of the Syrian people. I asked him whether he could not find in the history of Syria great and meaningful historical psychological phenomena and themes that would introduce him to its treasures and the course of its lofty histories. As he failed to answer, I advised him to read about the construction of the Carthaginian Empire,⁴ about its becoming so powerful

⁴ A Phoenician state that included, during the 7th–3rd centuries BC, its wider sphere of influence known as the Carthaginian Empire. The empire extended over much of the coast of Northwest Africa as well as encompassing substantial parts of coastal Iberia and the islands of the western Mediterranean Sea. See Richard Miles, *Carthage Must Be Destroyed: The Rise and Fall of an Ancient Civilization*. (Penguin, 2011).

and broadly expansive, about its historic events that still excite feeling and arouse the mind, or about any of the roles ancient Syria had played. My intention was that, in virtue of his direct contact with the outlook of the Syrian Social Nationalist ideology, he would be more able to connect in order to furnish a link between Syria's ancient and new topics, to ascertain the philosophical connection between the two, to extract the core high ideals in morals and ethics, both the detailed and subsidiary, and to highlight the most beautiful psychological manifestations and the most sublime moral positions according to the sentiments and visions inherent in the Syrian ethos. I registered this meaning in Aql's mind and then left, not expecting an answer.

After my third detention at the end of 1937 or the beginning of 1938, Amin Fakhri Ma'luf conveyed to me news that sent warm shivers through my whole body. He told me that Said Aql was working on a poem or epic entitled "Qadmus", the historical Syrian figure who taught Greece the alphabet and writing, and about whom beautiful legends had been written. Ma'luf informed me that Aql had completed part of the epic and read some of its passages to him and that he would like to meet me to recite what he had composed. Although the intense struggle I was having with the authorities prevented me from fulfilling Aql's wish, I had an ardent desire to meet him again to express to him my deep gratitude. After I read the epic a short time later, I was somewhat disappointed with his compositions. I found them well below my expectations. The author tried to tinge historical facts and traditional myths with narrow domestic

considerations, and thus he did injustice to both the myths and history.

I have recounted these incidents exactly as they occurred because I prefer to draw an example from the present context and from events in the contemporary history of our revival. Every historian and scholar can verify these incidents and approach their individual actors, who are still alive and in the prime of life, if they wish to: (1) obtain a fuller understanding of my theory on how a new dynamic literature has developed with the development of a new social philosophical vision that resulted in a broad political movement that addresses the life of an entire nation and whose influence has spread to neighboring states blending its melodies with the melodies of nations that are on the same psychological continuum [as Syria] to the tunes of glory acquired from the triumph of the best, the noblest, and the precious over the worst, the basest, and the vilest; and (2) fathom the indispensability of the new philosophical outlook on life, universe, and art for literary or artistic innovation.

I find it hard to imagine that merely reading ancient histories, acquainting oneself with classical Arabic literature and studying contemporary international literature would be sufficient to create a new genuine literary and artistic revival in any nation. All of the above require the spiritual motivation that derives from a new ideology or philosophical belief about life and its issues. Without this spiritual motivation, which is a real thing and not an illusion, literature will be nothing but pale, traditional or metaphoric colors devoid of radiance, luster and personality. It is neither a novelty that imprints its

characteristics on different eras and generations, nor a genuine relic with preserved lines of a sound character, whose power manifests itself in its explicit features. An observer cannot but appreciate its authentic reality, admire its charming, pure and specific traits, and esteem its great capacity to endure.

If the spiritual motivation derived from the philosophy of the Syrian Social National doctrine had reached all those men of letters and science who have embraced this doctrine before they had started their semi-specialized studies, their education would not have remained skeletal devoid of life and mobility until the Social National revival came along and breathed life into them, clothing the bones with flesh and pulsating the veins with warm blood. Without the conscious spiritual motivation, reading Shakespeare or Goethe, returning to the Book of Isaiah, improve one's knowledge, and delving deeper into ancient literature are not much of a benefit.

The violent political struggle that the Syrian Social National revival was forced into on both the internal and external fronts before its natural growth and strength had consummated, precluded the growth of a sizable comprehensive literary output. However, the spiritual motivation that this bona fide revival has generated has stirred the elements of life and refinement in many groups, and has awakened the sentiments of thousands of young people and students throughout the country. The doctrine is fermenting, the ideology is crystallizing and the role of wide-scale literary and artistic production, so indispensable in the revival of our epoch, which has started leaving behind a fallen era in the

throes of death, will arrive. Indeed, this role has already arrived and its first signs have appeared in several literary works of value.

One of the outcomes from the development of a new philosophical outlook on life, universe and art is that it leads to a dynamic change in the course of life and its manifestations and, above all, in both its short-term and long-term objectives. This is precisely what transpired in Syria with the appearance of the philosophical Syrian Social National outlook (not only in art and literature, but also in ethics, morals and deeds).

I have repeatedly heard this saying from discerning members in the Syrian Social National movement: "We were not aware of the extent of moral degradation and ethical decay that our people had reached until we joined the Syrian Social National Party. Now we can clearly see the rampant corruption in our nation and the danger it poses to its life".

As I stated earlier, a new philosophical outlook on life, universe and art opens new horizons for the intellect and new possibilities for human feelings. This is the starting point for seeking a new policy direction and new political forms and for inaugurating a journey of new literature and art. For literature and art cannot possibly change or renew except through the emergence of a new philosophical outlook broad enough to deal with its fundamental issues, that is the issues of life, universe and art encompassed in this outlook.

A person may ask: "Is it necessary for literary innovation to confine itself to the issues of a particular nation or does it cease to be innovation and loses its literary value if it

addresses itself to the issues of some other nation?”. My answer is: “No, it is not necessary”. Literary or artistic value does not lie in the identity or “nationality” of the subject matter; rather, it lies in the issues that fall under the subject matter, in the way they are handled and in the spiritual results thereof. As regards the subjectivity of the subject matter and its time and place, there is a peculiar feel to it whose importance increases or decreases in proportion to the ulterior or expressed motive for which the subject matter had been designed. Nevertheless, the intellectual and emotional undercurrents are not completely immune from the subject matter but are directly influenced by it. If the subject matter is exclusive, such as “Bint Yiftah”, it loses every public justification and is subject to being contradictory to or incompatible with the high ideals desired by the people for which it was written and to the psychological orientations that draw out its finest talents through admiration and persistence. “Bint Yiftah”, for instance, appertains more to Jewish literature than it does to Syrian literature. Its subject matter is purely Jewish and its causes and effects fall within the Jewish tradition, not to mention its inspirations and appeal (especially since the poet composed the story before he had attained national awareness and understood the new outlook on life).

Relying on foreign themes and subject matters does not create for a society with its own characteristics a distinct literature that can be added to the body of world literature and its corpus of works. Such an undertaking is justifiable only after the development of a national or private literature

based on a clear outlook on life, universe and the art, and even then on a limited scale. The subject matter would then be addressed from the standpoint of this outlook or the distinctive awareness that emanates from it. Thus, it would impart new and distinctive shades and shapes to the outlook by transmitting some of its own qualities. Under those circumstances, the subject matters must be of exceptional significance, whether historical, juridical, or humanitarian, and they must be shareable among all peoples (or at least among some of them).

Friedrich Schiller⁵ is a clear case in point. He composed *The Virgin of Orleans* about Joan of Arc,⁶ but this novel is only

⁵ Friedrich Schiller (1759 –1805) was a German poet, philosopher, physician, historian, and playwright. During the last seventeen years of his life (1788–1805), Schiller struck up a productive, if complicated, friendship with the already famous and influential Goethe. They frequently discussed issues concerning aesthetics, and Schiller encouraged Goethe to finish works he left as sketches. This relationship and these discussions led to a period now referred to as Weimar Classicism. They also worked together on *Xenien*, a collection of short satirical poems in which both Schiller and Goethe challenge opponents of their philosophical vision. John D. Simons, "Frederich Schiller". *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 94: German Writers in the Age of Goethe: Sturm und Drang to Classicism* (1990).

⁶ Joan of Arc (c. 1412 –1431), is considered a heroine of France for her role during the Lancastrian phase of the Hundred Years' War, and was canonized as a Roman Catholic saint. She was born to Jacques d'Arc and Isabelle Romée, a peasant family, at Domrémy in north-east France. Joan claimed to have received visions of the Archangel Michael, Saint Margaret, and Saint Catherine of Alexandria instructing her to support Charles VII and recover France from English domination late in the Hundred Years' War. The uncrowned King Charles VII sent Joan to the siege of Orléans as part of a relief army. She gained prominence after the siege was lifted only nine days later. Several additional swift victories led to Charles VII's

a fraction of what he wrote and it did not give him literary status. Schiller's most important work, according to his critics, is *The History of the Thirty Years' War* on the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Germany.⁷ The subject matter of this work is genuinely Germanic. Schiller composed prose and two exceptional poems or epics about the conflict. One is about the Catholic hero Albrecht von Wallenstein⁸ and the other is about the Protestant Gustavus Adolphus.⁹ Although

coronation at Reims. This long-awaited event boosted French morale and paved the way for the final French victory. On 23 May 1430, she was captured at Compiègne by the Burgundian faction, a group of French nobles allied with the English. She was later handed over to the English and put on trial by the pro-English bishop Pierre Cauchon on a variety of charges. After Cauchon declared her guilty she was burned at the stake on 30 May 1431, dying at about nineteen years of age.

⁷ The 'Thirty Years' War was a war fought primarily in Central Europe between 1618 and 1648. One of the most destructive conflicts in human history, it resulted in eight million fatalities not only from military engagements but also from violence, famine, and plague. Casualties were overwhelmingly and disproportionately inhabitants of the Holy Roman Empire, most of the rest being battle deaths from various foreign armies. See Gerhard Benecke, *Germany in the Thirty Years War*. (London: St. Martin's Press, 1978).

⁸ Albrecht von Wallenstein (1583–1634), was a Bohemian military leader and nobleman who gained prominence during the 'Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), in the Catholic side. His outstanding martial career made him one of the most influential men in the Holy Roman Empire by the time of his death. Wallenstein became the supreme commander of the armies of the Habsburg Emperor Ferdinand II and was a major figure of the Thirty Years' War. See Golo Mann, *Wallenstein: His Life Narrated*. (London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976).

⁹ Gustavus Adolphus (1594–1632) was the King of Sweden from 1611 to 1632 who is credited for the founding of Sweden as a great power (Swedish: Stormaktstiden). He led Sweden to military supremacy during the Thirty Years' War, helping to determine the political as well as the

the latter was the King of Sweden, his interference in the German religious conflict earned him a place in the history of Germany. The subject matter and its context revealed an exceptional poetic talent that found itself in its environment and home, concurring with the simple Arabic proverb: “The head of a household knows best what is inside it”. In the description of Wallenstein, for example, a vivid image of remarkable beauty is captured. I hope to see images of Syrian heroes in the poems of Syria's poets that display more radiant splendor than the poem about Wallenstein, and that are just as worthy of distinctive international recognition as Schiller's.

Shafiq Ma'luf's “Abqar” is another example worth considering. It is also a Syrian poem with a foreign subject matter. I will analyze it in a way that I could not do with “Bint Yiftah” because I have it before me, thanks to an acquaintance.

I do not think that Abbas Mahmoud Al-Aqqad would have had any complaints about the appearance of the book in which the poem was published. The shiny yellow paper lends comfort to the eyes, the pages have character, and each of the cantos is accompanied by a symbolic illustration sketched by an Italian artist.

The subject matter of the poem is Abqar, an “Arabian village inhabited by the fairies to which all great and esteemed are attributed”. In the poem, the poet embarks on a journey

religious balance of power in Europe. He was formally and posthumously given the name Gustavus Adolphus the Great by the Riksdag of the Estates in 1634. See Trevor Nevitt Dupuy, *The Military Life of Gustavus Adolphus: Father of Modern War* (Franklin Watts, 1969).

to Abqar in the style of Mohammad's Mi'raj, Al-Ma'arri¹⁰ or Dante¹¹. Like Mohammad in his night journey to Heaven and Hell with Gabriel, the immortal Syrian poet, Abul Alaa' al-Ma'arri, in his voyage to paradise in *Risalat al-ghufran*, and Dante Alighieri in his "La Divina Commedia,"¹² Shafiq Ma'luf takes his poem to Abqar accompanied by his *shaytan* (demon).

Why did Ma'luf choose "Abqar" as the theme for his poem? Possibly because he liked to be creative in the vein of

¹⁰ Abu al-'Ala' al-Ma'arri (973 –1057) was a blind Syrian philosopher, poet, and writer. Al-Ma'arri held and expressed an irreligious worldview which was met with controversy, but in spite of it, he is regarded as one of the greatest classical Arabic poets.

¹¹ Dante (c. 1265 – 1321) was an Italian poet during the Late Middle Ages. His Divine Comedy, originally called *Comedia* (modern Italian: *Commedia*) and later christened *Divina* by Giovanni Boccaccio, is widely considered the most important poem of the Middle Ages and the greatest literary work in the Italian language. See Teodolinda Barolini (ed.). *Dante's Lyric Poetry: Poems of Youth and of the 'Vita Nuova'*. (University of Toronto Press, 2014).

¹² Widely considered to be the pre-eminent work in Italian literature and one of the greatest works of world literature. The poem's imaginative vision of the afterlife is representative of the medieval world-view as it had developed in the Western Church by the 14th century. It helped establish the Tuscan language, in which it is written, as the standardized Italian language. It is divided into three parts: Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. The narrative takes as its literal subject the state of the soul after death and presents an image of divine justice meted out as due punishment or reward, and describes Dante's travels through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise or Heaven. Allegorically the poem represents the soul's journey towards God, beginning with the recognition and rejection of sin (Inferno), followed by the penitent Christian life (Purgatorio), which is then followed by the soul's ascent to God (Paradiso). See Prue Shaw, *Reading Dante: From Here to Eternity*. (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2014).

other poets in the field of Arabic literature, since the poem's subject matter, Abqar, does not involve any broad philosophical or psychological issue such as Heaven and Hell. Moreover, the subject is generally unknown in Syria except to those who have diligently studied Arab traditions and superstitions, such as Orientalists and their likes. Its primary images are those of myths and illusions characteristic of human groups whose souls are possessed by the darkness of ignorance, heedlessness and loneliness. Likewise, its fantasies are weird and lack any logical or philosophical sequence as in the appearance of the jinn riding on the back of the rabbit, the antelope, the jerboa, the serpent and other creatures, the conversation with the jinn, or the wonders of oracles, some of whom are born boneless and some half human. These kinds of fables are meaningless except for what they disclose about the state of mind of the peoples who indulge in them. The fables are quite different from the sophisticated myths with philosophical tints that address the material and spiritual issues of life. These myths are found among groups that displayed refined psychological reflection and built a sense of meaning and purpose in life and death around their myths. An example of this is the Syrian myths that greatly influenced Greek mythology and contributed to the development of a magnificent classical poetry and a most sublime philosophical thinking. Here, it is necessary to correct the common belief that classical poetry started with Homer.¹³ In fact, it started hundreds of years before Homer's "Ilyad" with the epic of

¹³ The legendary author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two epic poems that are the central works of ancient Greek literature.

“Tafun” in Ras Shamra, Syria, which is probably the ancient city of Ugarit¹⁴ as modern archaeological excavations revealed between 1929 and 1932.

The composer of “Abqar” did not choose this topic with the view to portraying the psychological condition of Arabs evident in their myths and fables, as they crossed the sand dunes and the desert routes amidst highlands and precipices. His aim was to ascertain in these primitive images, emanating as they were from ignorant fears and haunted confusion towards the Unknown, the significance of the lofty myths that paint philosophical symbols for the issues of human life and its major psychological issues. These symbols are extremely precise, based on reflection and a power of attentive observation that stems out of a readiness and an orientation indicative of an irresistible psychological ambition to understand the purpose of life, existence, survival, death, and the ultimate objectives of human existence, which are inherent tendencies of groups involved in an ongoing pursuit of intellectual refinement. Thus, the objective of the poet was greater and loftier than the means he used to achieve it, and the result is hardly rewarding for high perception. The poet tried to raise Arab legends to the level of philosophical mythology, but instead he managed to lower the philosophy of mythology to an illogical level.

Perhaps the best praise that can be bestowed on Ma'luf's poetic talent is that he tried to weave all the traditional Arab

¹⁴ An ancient port city in northern Syria, in the outskirts of modern Latakia, discovered by accident in 1928 together with the Ugaritic texts. Its ruins are often called Ras Shamra after the headland where they lie.

illusions about Abqar, jinn and sorcery into a single thread of thought and feelings connected to one of the most important human subjects: love. I do not think that anyone preceded Ma'luf in this attempt and I do not believe that anyone will surpass him in that. It is truly creative, but nevertheless, I hope it does not find many imitators in Syria.

Ma'luf did not need to make this long journey to Abqar to prove that he is a poet of narrative description. Nor did he need to make such a crossing to arrive at glorifying mortal love, which feeds on the veins of young blood and grows by the heat of young bodies. It then dries up as the veins dry and shrinks as the heat drops, and finally perishes when the bodies perish.

“Abqar” surpasses “Bint Yiftah” and everything I have read of classical and contemporary Syrian, Egyptian and Arab poetry (with the exception of the renowned Syrian poet Abul Alaa' al-Ma'arri) in that it was compiled with a burst of creative imagination. This imagination presents itself throughout its cantos, and it is assembled with great care in which the mind or intellect engages the sentiment in its composition. It is also a composite attempt that reveals a poetic capacity for rising above the accidental or instinctive emotions and for tackling human subjects that are relevant to the substantial and enduring qualities of human life. The epic is a fictional fantasy in which the imagery is hitched to the mind and the intellect is not neglected to give emotions free rein.

These, then, are the major poetic facts in “Abqar”. The epic poem is clearly devoid of a philosophical outlook on life,

universe and art capable of establishing or constructing a more contented and enduring life. In my opinion, the absence of such an outlook is the reason why the poet chose to bury his poetic talent in pursuing Arabian fables and fantasies that lack philosophical content or enchanting beauty. In addition, this absence of outlook is the reason why Ma'luf endured so much hardship extracting symbols and meanings from weird images, such as riding the devil's back to Abqar itself, the boats of the jinn, the jinn, the two sorcerers (Satih and Shiqq), and other things in the fantasy pipeline in which one cannot find any philosophic expression or meaning suitable for expanding the reader's horizon in life.

Therefore, I find "Abqar" empty [of any literary content] save from a display of ghostly myths and outdated primitive beliefs in the "discourse of the oracle" and a glorification of love on blazing lips conveyed in a beautiful poetic style with eloquent "meanings", a pleasant introduction and a sweet delicacy. However, the pleasure it creates in the soul is no different from the pleasure that comes from good wine: you enjoy drinking it, you become intoxicated by it, you find pleasure in its memory, but nothing more beyond that. Nonetheless, some verses in "Abqar" carry psychological glimpses or flashes that could almost amount to a spiritual revolution, such as the verse:

*What difference is there between my sleep and my wakefulness
When all that is in my wakefulness are dreams* (p. 146)

In the canton “Kahin Satih” and in the discourse “Kahin Shiqq”, a researcher will find an attempt to draw nearer to philosophy and social philosophy. However, there is nothing in this attempt beyond keeping up with old beliefs, like the words spoken through Satih:

*And people, fools and idiots
Run like the blind behind fate
While above them glistens the sword of destiny
And below them holes wide open (p. 238)*

Likewise, are the words spoken through Shiqq:

*What harm is it to me when the Immortal One
Did not give two hands to my body
Destiny still has a hand over me
So I have no need for hands (p. 242)*

However, in the “discourse of Shiqq”, the poet comes out with social reflections, some of which are imbued with a moral character that corresponds to the trajectories of Syrian thinking. For example

*The bad branches were trimmed off me
So the rest of me was reformed
Are the hands of any benefit when the one
Destroys what the other builds (p. 242)*

In addition,

*A heart part of which feels
And part is like solid stone
Sufficient for me is its bright half
It is not a heart whose half is dark (p. 244)*

The last two verses and the preceding one are among the most beautiful and most sublime poetic expressions in a realm of thought that may be considered suitable for cementing the foundations of society and civilization and the strengthening of weak morals.

Finally, I will discuss the objective of “Abqar”, which is love. The image of love that Shafiq Ma'luf paints in “Abqar” is only a little more sophisticated than the one he portrayed in his poem “al-Ahlam” (“Dreams”). This pagan, barbarian, or primitive love has neither been tamed by civilization nor moderated by culture, and so it has failed to sublimate with the soul. In “The song of the fairy”, the scrutinizer would think initially that the poet is trying to portray the tendencies and lusts of the jinn to extract a philosophical idea of love and its meaning. Yet the poem's ending, “The whispers of skulls”, proves that the portrait of love that the poet envisaged is that of embraces and kisses, of trembling ribs and lusting bodies. He moves gradually from the start towards this goal or this parable. In his description of “the fairy princess”, Ma'luf uses the following line as a metaphor for the love he seeks:

*She was touched by a soul not from Abqar
And he left her drowning in its seas (p. 170)*

It is as if Ma'luf wants to say that the human spirit penetrated the body of the fairy princess, and thus brought her the wishes of man and his visions, which turn out to be the pressing desires of the body:

*Woe to me, who would satiate my gluttony?
Is it ever so, that whenever there lies on my arm
A soul and I move my lips close to it
It slips away ... So I only kiss and I only
Embrace nothingness? (p. 173)*

The poet goes on to depict the world of jinn, saying:

*In the other world of exuding fragrances
desires pull at souls
Whenever desire burns in the hearts
Bodies find a way to extinguish it
There is naught in it but love filling the air
Filling the sand, the woods and its shades
Above the mountains that tower into the sky
In the water, in all of its entity (p. 174)*

This is the image of love that the poet envisages in the world of jinn and paints in "The song of the fairy".

Now look how Ma'luf describes love further in this canto:

*Who can bring me love whose light shines
from a spark ablaze in the eyes?*

*Who can bring me burning lips that when open
 reveal flaming kisses?
Who can bring me a beating breast into which
 I may enter even if it heaves
Like a flame for the approach of death
What is the use of an immortal soul in which I have lived
without embracing and without having been embraced (pp. 177-178)*

Ma'luf then moves from the jinn to "the geniuses", by which he means the poets. He sees their retreats and hears the whispers of their skulls, but you do not notice a difference between their memories and the wishes of the fairies. This is where the story's ending takes place, revealing its ultimate purpose and high ideal:

*By God, neither idols nor myths
Shake the bones when we are dead
The illusions have vanished
And its people have perished
But the one who would shake our remains
Is the one on whose lips
Are all the hopes of life
And on whose breast
Sleep all the memories on earth
The stars are delighted only by his radiance
And the clouds cry not into his handkerchief

Such is the earthly love
Its wings of determination do not fly*

*They attribute it to paradise while
Its bed is of thorns and gravel
What does love have anything to do with paradise
When there is no harm or hate therein
Power is for the fire even if
Love's feet smolder
As they touch the burning ground
Let the blazes grab it
And let it devour itself
If earth is hell for it
Then is there any happiness on earth*

This is the whole purpose of the poem. The poetic image is splendid, but the idealistic vision is naïve and could be characterized as pagan or bestial. For love, as the poet portrays it, is a biological disposition, with all that it involves in tendencies and physical yearning. It is not an idealistic psychological aim that uses the biological purpose as a ladder to climb towards the zenith of its “High Ideal” where the soul cuts itself free from the constraints of the need to preserve the species and the pleasures of its objectives and where a great psychological edifice is built for a better quality life in which the demand of love becomes the great social human happiness. Thus, love becomes a union of souls and the embrace of bodies becomes a means for the embrace of souls determined to make their stand in order to achieve the “High Demand” in a struggle against corruption and vice, to champion absolute truth, absolute beauty, and absolute love, and to discard bodily pleasures as an end in themselves. These

pleasures are the main source of harm, spite and petty, malicious and vile animosities, which see nothing in the world but their own pettiness, maliciousness and vileness.

The Course of Syrian Thought

If we evaluate Shafiq Ma'luf against the benchmark I set for a poet, which is "A poet is someone who is concerned with highlighting the most esteemed and the most beautiful in every realm of thought, feelings, or matter," he would emerge as a poet *par excellence*. He elevates his subject to its highest peak within the realm of thought and feelings he envisaged, which is a realm of an old, rigid and shortsighted outlook.

The concept of love as portrayed in "Abqar" is not peculiar to Shafiq Ma'luf. Rather, it is common among all the poets of the Arabic language who inherited the configurations of Arabic literature. The material love that takes form in physical pleasures is the ultimate object in Arabic literature as a whole. Within this spiritual realm, the poets of the Arabic language were raised, including Ma'luf, who wrote "Abqar" as a magnificent and beautiful monument to a vain and immortal outlook on life. Here, his creativity and imagination shone through. In poetry, he went far beyond the bounds of the outlook on life, the universe and art mentioned above. This is further evidence that the elevation of literature is not possible without a new, fundamental outlook indicative of a new world of understanding, demands and objectives. The elevation of literature cannot be achieved, as Taha Hussein claimed, by

increasing one's knowledge of old literature or of old foreign literature on which modern foreign literature is based.

In "Abqar", Shafiq Ma'luf develops a strong connection with the old Arabic literature and with the issues of Arab psyche and its imagination and ideals. He invests the poem with techniques of the most creative and innovative style. Indeed, if the condition for "innovation of literature" is improving its styles and producing new figures of speech, while preserving the old outlook on life, "Abqar" would make an important innovation. However, the aim of seeking a new kind of literature, as I see it, is to reach a new understanding of life through it. This new understanding elevates the soul to a higher level and enables it to comprehend a new realm of psychological perception comprising new "High Ideals" in which the hopes of life and its desires, arising from the characteristics of its genuine and original psyche, are crystallized. Failing that, every innovation in form that carries no innovation in substance is a vain distraction and short-lived pleasure with no duration or continuum except that of boring repetition.

"Abqar" is a beautiful creation of poetry both in form and method. However, did it trigger a new, better and more sublime direction in souls? It has to be said, no.

I said earlier that the contradiction between the aim of "representing the age", which leading men of letters of an age devoid of a new outlook on life had demanded and the need for innovation, lies in the fact that the men of letters who have dealt with the subject until now remained far from the

crux of the matter and its fundamental issues, which are not strictly literary issues.

There is in Syria a need for literary renewal, not for the sake of renewal, or changing styles, or introducing new **phantoms**, but to achieve an articulation of a new outlook on life, the universe and art: an outlook that can comprehend the psychological aspirations and demands that are compatible with the fundamental orientations of the Syrian self. Any other renewal will only aggravate the state of lethargy and darkness that have plagued the Syrian ethos the moment it deviated from its original path because of barbaric conquests that drove a wedge between Syrian literature and its psychological orientations. And one of the prerequisites of a new outlook on life, the universe and art, suited to the advancement of life and its progress, is "originality". Without originality, it would become one of the symptoms that negate personality and inner self and their characteristics, leaving the psyche in a state of uncertainty and unable to distinguish between true reality and fantasy. As the poet of "Abqar" says:

*What difference is there between my sleep and wakefulness
If all that is in my wakefulness are dreams*

The Syrian self finds none of its characteristics and roots in the poetic innovations of "Abqar", which consists of a collection of Arab fables that lack philosophical significance and any connection to the course of refined human thought and feelings portrayed in the Syrian myths. The Syrian social national outlook on life, universe and art has arrived to

remove the layers that have, for a long time, accumulated on the Syrian myths burying them and to re-establish the philosophic continuity between ancient Syria and the new social national Syria. The great difference in the spiritual outcomes between (a) concern for alien fables and subjects without a clear basic outlook on life, universe and art, and (b) concern for genuine myths with philosophical meaning in human existence based on a basic outlook on life, universe and art, emerges by citing some examples.

The tale of Adon or Adonis is not unknown. Anyone who examines it closely will find a purpose and a close association with the course of life. Moreover, it is not the only mythical fable. Among the archaeological discoveries made at Ras Shamra [Ugarit], near Latakia, is astonishing evidence of the grandness of Syrian imagination and Syrian thought about life and its important issues. These findings do not reveal anything less than the following fact: the most important Greek myths and the most important stories of the Jews in the Old Testament are taken from Syrian sources, a large portion of which was revealed in narrations and poems found during the Ras Shamra [Ugarit] excavations between 1929 and 1932. Other important portions were discovered in Nineveh, Assyria, Nimrud, Babylon and other places.

In 1929, the excavation team in Ras Shamra [Ugarit] led by Claude F. R. Schaeffer¹ discovered a previously unknown

¹ French archaeologist (1898-1982) whose excavation of the ancient city of Ugarit at Ras Shamra, Syria, disclosed a succession of cultures from the 7th or 6th millennium BC to about 1195 BC. Schaeffer was curator of the Prehistoric and Gallo-Roman Museum, Strasbourg (1924-33), and of the

alphabetical order. It proved to be the oldest yet known. Moreover, it was Phoenician [Semitic] (Canaanite), despite being written in [Akkadian] cuneiform. The discovery provided the first decisive evidence that the alphabetical order emerged in Syria. Previously, a significant number of prejudiced historians attempted to deprive Syria of the glory of its invention. Based on this great discovery and the fascinating scientific evidence it disclosed, the Académie des Belles Lettres in Paris, the Louvre,² and the French Department of Public Education asked Schaeffer, between 1930 and 1932, to lead a new excavation team to Ras Shamra [Ugarit] to look for both origins of an alphabetic order other than the ones that had already been discovered and for archaeological remains. In an article about this team

Museum of National Antiquities, Saint-Germain-en-Laye (1933–56). He conducted research at Ugarit from 1929 to 1939. He discovered the ancient port city to have been quite cosmopolitan; in various periods it showed evidence of cultural influence from the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Hittite, and Mediterranean civilizations. In addition to excavating many architectural remains and artifacts valuable in helping delineate the city's history, Schaeffer found hundreds of clay tablets bearing cuneiform inscriptions. Later identified as representing a Semitic language related to biblical Hebrew, the inscriptions included text of literary works of considerable sophistication and originality that also helped to establish the Canaanite origin of the stories of the patriarchs in the Bible. Schaeffer discussed the tablets in *The Cuneiform Texts of Ras Shamra-Ugarit* (1939) and *Ugaritica I-VI* (1939–69).

² Considered the world's largest art museum. A historic monument in Paris, France, its Near Eastern antiquities dates from 1881 and presents an overview of early Near Eastern civilization and "first settlements", before the arrival of Islam.

published by the American *National Geographic Magazine* in its July 1933 issue, the team leader stated:

The results of these new excavations surpassed all expectations, and made Ras Shamra one of the most important archaeological finds in the ancient Orient.

What concerns us in the Ras Shamra discovery are the splendid poems and epics, which prove, without doubt, that classical poetry originated in Syria and was subsequently copied by the Greeks. The Greeks would then conspire with the Romans to deny Syria of its entitlement to artistic creativity and leadership of human thought. Schaeffer continues:

Ugarit was not only important in trade and politics. Great authors and philosophers lived there 3,300 years ago. We found whole chapters of their works in the temple library of Ras Shamra. They also wrote in cuneiform signs, divided into several columns, on extra-large slates. Many times, the author had not estimated the length of his work correctly so that he lacked space for the last chapters. Therefore, he had to bring the lines closer together toward the end, as modern typists do in “single space”, and to squeeze his last lines into tiny letters. Of one work, we have several chapters consisting of more than 1,000 words, but the complete writing may have consisted of more than 3,000 lines. It represents a heroic epos.

Long before Homer's immortal "Iliad", Phoenician authors in Ugarit wrote epics about the strange adventures of a legendary hero called Taphon. Taphon was a favorite of some of the gods by whom the Phoenician pantheon was densely populated. The Ras Shamra text tells us that no fewer than 50 gods and 25 goddesses lived there. Taphon could not avoid making bitter enemies among them because he took sides in their quarrels. These Phoenician gods reveal themselves as warlike, vindictive and cruel.

El, the very old father of the gods, whom the author calls *Mikal-sum*, *Melek* or *Moloch*, the "King of the Year", strives in vain to keep peace among his descendants. However, he is not omnipotent. Much against his will, El must often comply with the wishes of his divine wife, *Asherat*, the Goddess of the Sea. She has no fewer than 70 sons, some of whom she favors at the expense of the others. This favoritism is the source of all quarrels in the kingdom of the gods.

The young god, *Baal*, a born tyrant who aspires to the absolute monarchy, is El's most bitter opponent. The story about the struggle between the old and just King of the Year and *Baal* is of rare dramatic interest and rich in exciting episodes. *Baal* is finally victorious, and youth, with all its cruelty and injustice, defeats venerable age. Therein lies the bitter lesson which the author wished to portray.

Another Ras Shamra slate depicts the fight between Mot, who symbolizes fruit-bearing Nature, and Alein, who rules over rain and wind.

Mot has killed Alein and the humans complain to the gods. The earth has become dry and wild animals hungrily roam outside the cities. The goddess Anat, sister of the rain god Alein who was killed, calls Mot to account but Mot lies about his deed and proposes (in Alein's place) to change the deserts into green fields. But he fails, and all offerings made to him by humanity in the hope of getting rain are in vain.

Then, her patience at end, Anat takes a sickle and kills Mot. She burns his body or partly eats it and scatters the remains over the fields. Thus, Mot himself becomes the crop that falls under the sickle to give bread to humankind. After Anat's revenge, Alein rises from the dead and ample rains fall again. Other gods of the Phoenician pantheon participate in the story, each with his own mission:

- El-Hokmot, the God of Wisdom, who admonishes the mortals to patience and resignation to their fate.
- Adon, Adonis of the classical Phoenicians, who fills them with enthusiasm for beauty and love.
- the Goddess Amat, servant of the powerful Asherat, Mother of the Gods, who shows human beings how they can make bricks out of clay to build houses and temples.

Baal himself decides to fight the seven-headed serpent that human beings particularly fear. Ltn is the serpent's name in the corresponding Ras Shamra text (vowels are not written out either in Phoenician or in Hebrew.) In the Biblical references of Isaiah 27:1 and Psalm 74:14, the serpent has the same name but it is spelled "leviathan" there. Here was touch information of sensational and revolutionary importance.

We all remember Daniel, who with Noah and Job, was among the most pious men of his time. Daniel appears in one of the Ras Shamra texts under the name of Din-el, which is translated "justice of God".

Schaeffer mentions other evidence of critical importance in the article. However, as it is not relevant to the central subject of this study, I will not discuss it here. As for the passages from his article translated above, especially the literary aspect of them, they strike at the depths of the soul of every Syrian and every person who admires and loves philosophy and the arts.

Although Schaeffer presents us a brief, incomplete, inadequate portrait in a rigid, brief news article that lacks any spirit or creativity, it nevertheless contains basic psychological and specific features that are exalting and brilliant. Moreover, the issues addressed in the article are radiant and fresh, and seem as if they were created only yesterday or today. They show that Syrian perception covered all aspects of life: old age, youth, fatherhood, sonhood, love, hate, wisdom,

courage, justice, injustice, ambition and contentment. You find in it youth that pulsates with other than the hysteria of lust and biological love, but with the ambition for glory and fighting Leviathan, or the dragon of vices, which was and still is the fear of mankind. You also come across the god of wisdom preaching resignation to fate, although his role is intermingled with others and is perhaps the weakest.

Also, we must not forget the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh, which ends with the wonderful story of the deluge and which was discovered in the library of the great Assyrian king Ashurbanipal.³ The entire story was subsequently transcribed by the Jews into their Torah with some superficial changes in some of its minor partial events.

How often have historians and scholars glorified Greece for the splendor of its legends, the most important of which are in fact Syrian in origin? For example the myth of the Ugaritic goddess Anat's revenge on Mot and how she scattered his remains in the fields to make them fertile was taken over, like so many other Syrian myths, almost verbatim into Greek mythology. And yet the world accuses us of having borrowed these myths from the Greeks! In fact, the world is indebted to us for glorious philosophical views despite the claims that we are indebted to Greece alone.

³ King of the Neo-Assyrian Empire from the death of his father Esarhaddon in 668 BC to his own death in 631 BC. The fourth king of the Sargonid dynasty, Ashurbanipal is generally remembered as the last great king of Assyria.

But once gifted Syrian men of letters examine these rich spiritual treasures, they will grow ever more certain of the truth of their views and the greatness of their historical roots, and of the power of those authentic philosophical and artistic sources of inspiration to be found in the very being of their nation. When these sources are fully understood, they will enable those men of letters to create a noble, beautiful and eternal literature. Such a literature, that emanates from the very core of our Syrian being, and is based upon a new and authentic outlook on life, the universe and art, will produce the psychological, literary and artistic renaissance for which we long with all our being.

Therefore, our enlightened men of letters should take a pilgrimage to the abode of the Syrian gods, and return carrying with them a literature that enables us to discover the verities of our psyche as embedded in life's greater truths, verities that our ancient systems of thought had grappled with in our myths, verities that occupy a place in human thought and emotions transcending all other thoughts and emotions.

I shall now address all the poets of Syria: come, let us raise high a flaming torch before this nation that is stumbling in darkness, a torch that lights up our reality, our aspirations and our wholesome existence. Come, let us build for our nation places of love, wisdom, beauty and hope by making use of the history of our Syrian nation, its talent, the philosophy of its myths and its teachings that deal with the major topics of human existence. Come, let us adopt an outlook on life, the universe and art in light of which we can resurrect our great and beautiful reality from where it lies buried - a reality that

does not see in love only rosy cheeks and breasts and graceful waistlines, nor see in youth mere lips pressed against lips, nor eyes burning with desire. Rather, let it be a reality that sees love as beautiful souls seeking sublime aims, for the sake of which they must endure vast hardships, made more bearable by a unity of souls in a unity of emotion and purpose. It is the sort of love where, when one mouth touches another, one soul is being poured into another and one soul tells the other: I am with you in victory or in martyrdom. It is a love that sees youth as depicted in the Syrian myth of the god Baal, a huge power that seeks to kill the leviathan of vice, meanness and ugliness. This beautiful thought, deeply embedded in our Syrian life and traditions, enables us to capture the meaning of these lines of verse by the immortal Syrian poet al-Ma'arri:

*Youth is a flame. If you set it a task
Let it hasten to do it, before Time puts out that flame.*

Come, let us adopt a novel outlook on life, the universe and art, a new understanding of existence and its problems, wherein we discover the reality of our psyche, our aspirations, our ideals.

Come to freedom, duty, order and strength, not because they are slogans of a political social party but because they are symbols of our thoughts and feelings in life. For this reason, they became slogans of a movement of national revival in which we have placed all our hopes, strength and will. Let us establish a genuine literature that has true roots in our psyche and history.

Come, let us understand our history and ourselves in the light of our own outlook on life, existence and art. In this way, we will produce an immortal literature worthy of world respect.

The Course of Syrian Literature

With this new direction, both literature and life can go hand-in-hand. We would have a new literature tailored for a new life that offers something new to human existence and its issues. In this new literature, we find the individual and society and their relationships and high ideals, just as they are perceived in the new and authentic outlook on life, universe and art [offered by the Syrian Social National Party]. True literature should be an ideal medium for the transmission of the new thought and feelings, emanating from the new outlook, to the sentiments and awareness of the group and to the eyes and ears of the world. In this way, true literature becomes a national and a global literature because it raises the nation to the level of this new outlook and illuminates its path towards it, bringing, at the same time, a genuine psychological wealth of thought and feelings, in all their colours, to the world. Our literature cannot be reborn, nor will we possess a world literature (one that demands the world's attention and claims a lasting world-class value) except in this way.

Assuming that we can create a new literature or generate an "innovation" in literature without this firm connection between literature and the new outlook on life, universe and art, what would be its purpose or benefit if it is strange to and disconnected from the psychology of the group [or nation]

and its intellectual and sentimental issues or, even still, if it is cut off from the human issues that exist within the life of a certain group and the realm of its thought and feelings at the most refined level that these two psychological factors may reach?

The literature that is of symbolic and functional value for the nation and the world concerns itself with the bigger issues of thought and feelings from the standpoint of a sublime, authentic and superlative outlook on life, universe and art that has its own distinctive characteristics. Once established, the new outlook gives rise to a new understanding of human issues, such as the relationship between the individual and society and the issues of order, power, truth, etc. Some of these issues will be old and thus, will resurface with the development of this new outlook. Other issues will emerge with its appearance. For instance, prior to the emergence of the new outlook, freedom was understood in different ambiguous forms and contexts that made it unfit for the new outlook. Therefore, when the new outlook on life, which was the *raison d'être* of the Syrian Social National movement, came along, it co-joined freedom to duty, order and power, and offered a detailed explanation of freedom within society and towards other societies in its teachings, and thus, a new concept of freedom emerged. This new concept contained new elements based on a new understanding of life forms as perceived by the Social National renaissance, as well as a clarification of the meaning and dynamics of freedom within these forms. Similarly, love used to be a case of burning physical desires appearing in the form of eyes transmitting the

darts of Cupid, the intoxicating taste of lips, and in the beguiling sway of bodies. With the new outlook, love has become a symbol of the beauty of life as a whole and of the participation of souls in such beauty.

I was once shown a book of proverbs and sayings. As I flipped through its pages, I stumbled on a saying that basically describes friendship as the most beautiful thing in life. Consequently, I wrote on one of its pages: "Friendship is the consolation of life while love is the incentive that propels us to reach for the high ideal." Whatever my opinion of freedom might be, it is my opinion of love that matters here because it is directly related to the new conception of love. For, the High Ideal is what is perceived by a clear specific outlook on life, the universe and art, and love that is conscious of this outlook always points out towards and reaches out to its 'High Ideal' with every single quiver. The issue of the reunion with the beloved being the ultimate spiritual demand is dead for the new outlook on life, the universe and art and is supplanted by the perception of love as a union of thought and feelings and the collective understanding of souls of the beauty of life and the attainment of its 'High Demands'.

A new outlook on life, universe and the art has emerged in Syria. This new outlook has given rise to a new course of life for the once suppressed and entrapped currents of Syrian soul. Will the Syrian men of letters, especially the poets, heed this new development and answer the call and partake in raising the Syrian people to the level of the new outlook and its high ideals? Will they produce a literature rich with the intellectual and emotional issues that were concealed in the

depths of our souls until they resurfaced in the new outlook on life?

I am confident this is happening now to all the men of letters who have come in contact with this new outlook and have understood its fundamental issues in the realms of rights, politics, economics, sociology, ethics, morals and high ideals. I am certain that this will happen, too, to all the young people who are currently in touch with this dynamic outlook and blending with it. However, I am doubtful about the men of letters who emerged prior to the appearance of the new outlook. They remain distant from its goals and major issues and out of touch with the course of the new life it has generated. I am also doubtful about those who can sense the new course of life, but have not found the inner strength to shift from the domain of one outlook to that of another and from one course in life to another. Some of the excuses that deter these men of letters from embracing the new outlook are clear in the egocentric tendency (*al-naẓa' al-fardiyyah*) alluded to in Yusuf Ma'luf's letter to his kin poet Shafiq Ma'luf. Yusuf wrote to Shafiq:

Give due care in your future works to be creative in your endeavors, whether in thought or deed, and to be imitated, not an imitator, in all your work, because a person's fame in life depends on this basic principle.

At the beginning of this study, I clarified the shortcoming of such thinking, which makes personal fame the ultimate objective of thought and work in life. Additionally, working

with the "basic principle" of the said poet leads to the destruction of the basic facts that ought to be the ultimate objective of every constructive thought and every beautiful, dynamic feeling.

If every intellectual were to seek to be imitated, imagine how much chaos and discrimination will exist among competitors crowding for "creativity" in order to achieve fame and rise above their colleagues! These colleagues will then become their adversaries. Wouldn't such a competition lead to hostility, hatred and envy concealed behind a thin veil of hypocrisy and deceit in outward appearances and demands? I previously maintained that Shafiq Ma'luf accepted the individualistic principle set down by his uncle. However, he did not submit to it entirely because he needed to justify his own action of imitating others in poetry. Thus, he said: "If I had knocked on a door that others have previously walked through, then is there in everything that the minds have tackled any door that people have not knocked on?". I also said that Shafiq Ma'luf, in this respect, came very close to knocking on a door that opens on a horizon beaming with the lights of a new and authentic thinking. He was only one short step or jump away from entering that door. What is this short step or jump, and how might it be made to happen?

I already stated that the required step separates two worlds apart and might require a walking stick. This is because it is a step that would transform its candidate from one psychological state to another and from one outlook to another and would thus accrue to itself a new world in all its forms, colors, objectives and ideals. The required step or

jump is achieved by marshalling all the psychological powers required to cast aside the world of egocentric tendencies and physical objectives and to abandon the desire for individual fame and glory as an end in itself. The required step or jump is to leap into the world of seeking that major fundamental truth on which the intellect can settle and whose feelings can be reassured and subsequently of pursuing that truth whether arrived at from within or through external guidance.

It is the truth of the individual and society and the truth of the sublime soul that has overcome the rattling chains of base materialism and soared to the sky - a sky that is not free of pain and torment, but whose pain **and torment are for something much more sublime than that** - for the sake of burning desires that would continue to torment the souls until they find a way to achieve it after the burning physical desire is extinguished and the biological need is satisfied.

السما التي لا تخلو من ألم وعذاب ولكن ألمها وعذابها ليسا من أجل الشهوة المتلظية في المهج، بل من أجل ما هو أسمى من ذلك بكثير — من أجل ما لو أطفئ لظى الشهوة الجسدية وقضت النزعة البيولوجية وطرها لظل لظاه يلذع النفوس ويعذبها حتى تجد له تحقيقاً

The step is for the sake of defeating what is ugly, base, inferior, and humiliating and to raise what is beautiful, sublime, noble and dignified so that no quivers of love would exist except within this sphere of consciousness that raises the value of humanity many levels above satisfaction with the comfort of material biological tendencies that are heedless of the beautiful psychological aspirations involved in a comprehensive outlook on life, universe and the art.

The only golden rule suited to the advancement of life and literature is this: seeking the vital fundamental truth for a better life in a more beautiful world and loftier values. It does not matter whether the dawning of this truth is your creation or mine, or from someone other than you and I, or whether it comes from a person of wealth and power or a common person. The objective must be the intended fundamental truth, not the negative trend determined by individual, particularistic and arbitrary desires.

Shafiq Ma'luf came very close to this principle in his letter to his uncle. However, he stopped one step short of reaching it. Had he taken that step, he would have made the decisive transition from one world to another without his uncle's advice, which requires continuous sifting, without Amin al-Rihani's cryptic, vain and hollow guidelines, and without the existing confusion among Syrian and Egyptian writers on "innovation" and how to achieve it.

I believe that Shafiq Ma'luf has the mental-spiritual aptitudes to realize this principle and the ultimate psychological objective on which an enduring literature rests. He stopped very short of this realization, contrary to most of the poets and writers of Syria and Egypt who stopped at a great distance from it. It is the only realization that is likely to secure a place in souls and posterity. That Shafiq Ma'luf had moved close to this realization is evident in his words: "To me, the poet is not someone who is applauded by one generation only to be forgotten by the next generations as situations change and new conditions arise". This is a position that is not attainable except by connecting with a new outlook

on life, universe and the art consisting of a fundamental truth ideal for creating a new world of thought and feelings.

If the sceptics do not find this world to be the ultimate and most sublime, at least it would be a world above past worlds and an indispensable stage for the continuation of human psychological advancement. Therefore, it is an immortal world, because what will follow it in the distant future will both proceed from and base itself on it, or at least the souls that have ascended to that new world will be ready to accept a better world, if the unforeseen of perpetuity were to reveal that such a world is possible. For now, we cannot presently (and for the foreseeable future) envisage the requirements, particulars and issues of this world. However, we can envisage, according to the philosophical principle of continuity and uniformity that I always observe in trying to understand human existence, that it will be firmly connected to the world of our new outlook and its particulars and issues. We can also see, in line with this outlook, that its world will not be an accidental development without roots, but a world that is impossible to achieve without an intrinsic origin whose realities are connected to the realities of the older world. Thus, the new realities would originate from the old genuine realities with a new understanding of life and its issues, of the universe and its potential, and of art and its objectives.

I have now reached the aim towards which in this hasty study I have wanted to direct the thought and feelings of Syria's writers, and which has been interrupted repeatedly during its course. I implore them not to think that I undertook this study motivated in any way by the urge to

outpace them for "innovation" or by the desire to be "imitated". What motivated me is the infatuation with the fundamental truth that my thinking and studying have reached and my understanding (which I entirely owe to my nation and its psychological reality) has led me to. I was bound by duty to place this truth before the thinkers and writers of my nation and before my nation as a whole, for the sake of a more enduring and more sublime purpose. This truth will help every thinker and writer to cement his/her personality in it and to endure inside it, and it will enable the nation to develop a world literature in which it can preserve its personality and achieve eternal life.

APPENDICES

Excerpts from Shafiq Ma'luf's ABQAR

[C. Nijland and Shafiq al-Ma'luf, "A 'New Andalusian'
Poem. (*Journal of Arabic Literature*, 1987, Vol. 18, 1987): 102-
120.]

I

Moments of awakening and visions

O friend, awakening crawls over
my eyelids, feels their softness,
illuminates their doors,
to find a dwelling-place.

She says, "O poet, leave sleep alone!
the morning calls you, waving its hand.
Pleasures lie within your reach;
take hold of them, be not too slow!
He at whom fate is scoffing, let him
scoff at his unjust fate."

"Awakening, you shake the slumber
from my eyes; it flies away and dreams stay distanced
as the morning blows its breath
over my lamp, puts out its flame.
Why should a man like me
exchange the bad for worse?
to be awake or be asleep is just the same

when wakefulness is nought but visions."

II

The Shaytan of the poet

Morning rays brighten the hills,
the playground of sweet fragrance,
caressing blossoms, a cloud
embracing them attracts my eye.

I scarcely see the cloud, or
underneath I see my own shaytin of poetry,
as if, after appearing secretly,
a sorcerer had cast him from the earth-

A fire-brand from hell in his mouth
emitting flaming sparks-his face a skull, whose teeth
and hollow caves affright me,
the socket of his eye a hole
from which past times look out.

...

He approaches me saying:

"I obey your command.

I came, when night folded its trail,
Good morning, poet!"

III

The speech of the Shaytan

*I said to my Shaytan, "from above do you come to me
or from the fissures of the earth?"*

*He said: "I come from a hidden land
called Abqar.*

A sorceress rules the jinn;

*she sees the unseen in the flight of birds;
 poetry put its shaytans under her sway,
 and now she commands Hanjial and Hawbar-
 a sorceress, who enfolds generations
 and ages in her cloak;
 female demons follow her steps
 when she burns mandal or amber-
 a jinn clad in a gown of light
 she shines on every si'lah (female demon);
 the earth trembles when she comes near
 whistling ghastly.
 Come, let us go to Abqar
 and let us see that rugged,
 unknown land."*

IV Thabar

*The volcano erupts,
 ignites the dark;
 but the evil spirit Thabar,
 drunken, quarrelsome,
 opens not his eyes
 before the light
 has changed to smoke.
 Thabar appears
 emitting sparks,
 smiting man
 with woe and ruin.
 He teaches dazzled man
 to kindle flames
 and when he sees
 man killing man*

*his victor's laugh
resounds between the graves.*

*He treated humankind unjustly
creating fatherlands,
drawing border lines
shielded with guns.*

*And when the soldiers
have fallen for their flags,
he crushes what remains
and roams among the dead,
taking the shackles
from the feet of slaves,
folding them into crowns
for victors' heads.*

*Then Thabar looks askance
into the vale and says with sparkling eyes:
"O you, who cast your gaze
into the gloomy pit,
I dug another pit as deep
into the human soul."*

V

Song of the Amirat al-Jinn

A spark of light, not more, I am,
a sigh of God, He raised
high over heaven's domes,
a flame in outer space.

Who satisfies my appetite? alas,
whenever spirits lie upon my wrist,
and then my lips come close,
they slip away, and I do not kiss
or hold anything but utter nothingness.

The world where
sweet fragrance and souls' desires compete;
when love sets fire to the brain
the flesh is there to quench the flame.

Nothing but love is there, the air,
the earth, in woodlands' shade,
on mountains rising in the sky,
in water, everywhere.

A world of apparitions thick and dense
where passion, unlike here, is not absurd.

We are, alas, but maidens of the dark,
we are, though circling in our sphere,
nothing but tiny ghosts amalgamated,
like fragments of a cloud;
when some of us
try to embrace, they melt together.

O heart, in which hope slept,
while pain tried to make hope move away,
however much that pain may weigh,
burden my back with it!

O loads that bend the backs of men,
your crushing weight is dear to me,

for worse than weights that break the back
is rest that lasts eternally.

Who gives me love lighted
by burning, sparkling eyes?

Who gives me glowing lips
opening for ardent kisses?

Who gives me someone with a beating heart,
whose breast I enter,
though he may waver
in the storm of death as torch-flames do?
What use is my eternal spirit-life
when I do not embrace nor am embraced?

You bearer of the flesh, give it to me
and take my eternity as its price.

My spirit knows no decay; who wants it?
I gladly bear the burdens of the flesh.
Who buys my burning belt?
A Shroud I shell it for.

Commenting about the last stanza, Nijland notes:

This poem is quite innovative in my opinion, but not in that of Antun Sa'ada, who says in his *al-Sira' al-fikri fi al-adab al-Suri*, that it is a typical *Jabiliyya* poem, in so far as it exalts physical love at the expense of spiritual love; this, according to Sa'ada, is turning the clock back. It is true that Shafiq al-Ma'luf exalts physical love; I cannot see anything

reprehensible in that, although, I must admit, that in 1936 many would not have held this opinion.

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