Between East and West
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Translated into English by Mohamed Wajdi Ben Hammed

It’s all relative, all relative.
What we consider to be the East can be for others the West. At a certain point in this vast cosmic emptiness directions vanish. Thus, a verse by our master Jalāl ad-Dīn al-Rūmī, in the *Masnavi*, remains forever in my mind: “When the night fell, I was Eastern, and when the morning came, I became Western.”

Allow me to start from myself, to inform you about my upbringing.

All the parts of the world converge in me and I am nothing but the product of that converging. I came to the world on the 9th of May 1945. This date has a special significance. I was born minutes after the end of World War II in the village of Juheyna in the south of Egypt where my tribe from Arabic descent settled near the temple of Abydos of Seti. It was a miracle that its murals and the stories they contain survived all the wars and the neglect.

No one in my poor family had any relationship with literature, despite my father’s immense natural gift for storytelling. I relied on myself, my hard word and skills, to progress in life. My mother was illiterate but she had access to a popular repertoire of stories, proverbs and poems.

In Upper Egypt, people breathe poetry, along with the rules of moral behavior and what we call social ethics.

My mother played a major role in my intellectual growth both by passing to me experiential knowledge accumulated for centuries and by encouraging me to tell stories simply by being always there to listen to me.

When I turned seven on the day of ‘Eid, I crossed, for the first time, Al Hussein Square, the spiritual center of Egypt. Egypt, the ancient country that ruled the Nile and invented writing, must always have a center. Its people always sensed the presence of invisible powers that put order into the world. Egypt that the American archaeologist James Henry Breasted celebrated in his book *The Dawn of Conscience* written in 1905 and translated into Arabic in 1955.

I still remember entire pages from this book as if I have just finished reading it. I remember pages from *Les Misérables* and the "Sindibād" children magazine whose illustrations were drawn by Hussein Bicar, a great artist with whom I had the chance to work at the journal of Akhbar Al-Yawm whose brush composed my visual memory.

I started searching for literary inspiration. This is how I found my way to the sellers of used books on the street pavement next to Al-Azhar—still a mosque and a university, an educational and intellectual center founded by the Fatimids a thousand years ago. Stretched around Al-Azhar were old bookshops and publishing houses, some specialized
in Arabic and Islamic heritage as well as Sufi writings, and others publishing in Kurdish, Turkish, Malay, Amharic and, of course, Arabic.

In the Al-Azhar libraries I started to read about the ancient heritage and was chiefly interested in neglected texts, the literary works that were not acknowledged in the national educational curricula such as Sufi and popular literature. I found myself at the crossroad of two legacies: the translated foreign and the ancient Arabic, especially the Egyptian.

Time has been the life-long question that baffles me. I strive to find an answer to the question that accompanied me since my childhood, since the first time my consciousness sensed the world: Where did yesterday go?

This question led me to the past, to history. To what reached us of the remnants of texts from various ages. The philosophical tradition, from the Egyptian wise man Ipuwer to Heidegger and Sartre, from Buddha to Confucius, to the oral texts that were transmitted to us as poems and narratives.

I lived with the Arabic and Egyptian historians who documented reality moment by moment, notably Muhammad Ahmed Ibn Iyas, the Hanafi Egyptian historian who witnessed the decline of Mamluk rule in Egypt and the ravaging Ottoman invasion of the 16th century. The history of Egypt since the arrival of Arabs in the 7th century is recorded day by day. I came across new narrative techniques. It made realize that language is a state of mind that changes from one project to another and not a static entity. I was invested in fashioning a distinctive personal style, in creating a narrative that I did not come across before in old poetry – not in Arabic, Persian, Chinese, the Japanese Haiku, African tradition, nor the oral legacy of the nomads.

Since the beginning, I aspired to write a text that is different from all that I read. I am still convinced that the artist must contribute something novel to the traditions of humanity. The whole matter is directly related to freedom of speech: imitation constricts and innovation expands. From the beginning I was anxious, longing to find a form that grants the greatest degree of freedom of speech. All that I discovered in Arabic literary tradition and world literature contains elements that propel me to fashion a private literary space, to extinguish the old through exploration and comprehension, to contain it both as text and as spirit so that I can create the different. I aspired to overcome the others despite my admiration for them, my amazement at their work and their enrichment of my spiritual experience. I made the acquaintance of Al-Tawhidi, Al-Suhrawardi, Ibn Sab’in who corresponded with the Roman Emperor Frederick II and answered his questions, and Ibn ‘Arabi, Al-Nefri, Ibn Baṭūṭah, the traveler, and Ibn Jubayr, and Ibn Fadlan who traveled to Northern Europe under the Abbasid Caliphate. I stood long before Ibn Sīnā, Abū ʿAla Al-Ma’arri, Al-Mutanabbi, Abu’l-Barakāt al-Baghdādi and Hamid al-Din al-Kirmānī searching for guidance in order to understand what puzzled me, what compelled me to read and write. Writing—that act that militates against annihilation and senses the road to the answer or to the inquiry, and, most often than not, the question is more significant than the answer.
I always have read, and continue to read, Arabic and world literature aspiring to grasp the original. My spiritual formation knows no dividing lines between what belongs to the East and what belongs to the West. During my sixty years of age, I never stopped searching, as all the boundaries were fused into one humanist family, my family that extended to include figures that I know more than real people I lived with. This is my relationship with Arabic poets throughout the ages, with the great Persians and the rest of cultures, from the anonymous blind guitar player in the dawn of the history of ancient Egypt through whom I read the most eloquent elegy on mutability and change, on that which is erased and that which is reborn without us noticing, to Mahmoud Darwish, the greatest contemporary Arabic poet. For me, Captain Ahab is one with Kamal Abd al-Jawad. I unify with Giovanni Drogo, the protagonist of *The Tartar Steppe* by Dino Buzzati, for whose eternal tomb I searched near Venice. I reached the city in an early morning and paid my respects to the writer I met and with whom I share with my greatest affliction: life and death. Giovanni Drogo, his tragedy is my tragedy.

I am Giovanni Drogo
I am K. in Kafka's *The Trial*.
I am Ivan Karamazov.
I am one of the monks in Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*.
I am streaming in the constellation of my master the Great Sheikh Ibn 'Arabi. I spent days at his shrine in Damascus.
I am consumed by the poetic passion of my master Jalâl ad-Dîn Rûmî. I visited his shrine in Konya, I attended his memorial service and joined in the Mawlawîyah chants.
I am a follower of Al-Tawhîdî. I try to capture divine signals. All we gain from the world is the opportunity to recount the suffering of the created in his earthly journey.
I am Sindibâd, never ceasing to crave departure.
I am the verses of Tao, what it contains between its lines. I am between the partiality and wholeness, between the shadow and its origin. I am the bridge over the river of Drina that Ivo Andrić recuperated from forgetfulness.
I am consumed in the passion of the voice that spoke in ancient Egypt:
"Yesterday I finished my life
and today I exit to the day
I am the one who couldn't hold on to life so he tried to extend it and tell its story
For perhaps what we learnt could reach those who are yet unborn."

In old Cairo and in Upper Egypt I walked between the pillars of temples and the crowded squares. I climbed the lofty minarets and contemplated the Coptic icons and particularly the gaze of the expressive eyes in them... I realized the essence of Egyptian architecture. The ancients resisted absence with construction. The Egyptian builds to engrave his name. As long as it resonates, he continues to exist within nonexistence. When I traveled to China I was amazed when I entered the tombs of Emperors and traversed the Silk Road. Despite the difference in creed, the purpose is one: combating forgetfulness through the
act of construction. Truly, every creative act, whether in architecture, music or writing, is a human attempt to transcend forgetfulness and exclude nothingness. Every creative act is an existential innovation. The purpose is one, regardless of whether the elements are of the East or the West. Borders move with the human being. In the windows of the Duke's castle in Venice I saw the ornamental patterns of the Eastern carpet. In St. Mark's Square, the influence of the mosque architecture was apparent in the balconies that mount the walls. In Sicily, I stopped to contemplate the fusion of religious creeds, mosques from the outside, domes and towers similar to minarets. Once we enter and pass through the hallway we find a church within. Faiths and ideas travel with the human being in every direction. No culture stands by itself; it is impossible. Every culture contains a heritage from another culture.

In the carpet that I studied, I saw messages transmitted from the deserts of Caucasia or the steppes of Turkmenistan to the rest of the world. In the Atlas Mountains, I saw them weaving carpets and scribing in them, through the ornamental patterns, their life stories. All great creative acts have their own memory. Writing is the building of meaning that attempts to contain existence. The human being resists annihilation with writing, drawing… Architecture is a memory, a state of nostalgia and, at times, a state of protest. This is how the mosque of Ibn Tulun, in all its parts, appeared to me, especially its minaret that carries a message by the founder of the mosque to the Great Mosque of Samarra, from where he came.

In the Al Mansur Qalawun mosque, the talented architect brought together Andalusia and Persia through two opposing arches: one is a Seljuq from the Far East facing the provost of ornaments from Andalusia. The Mihrab is adorned with Byzantine mosaic. Petals of the akansha and the lotus flower are letters of connection between ornaments from the East or the West. The triangle, the square, the circle, the articulation of existence in specific shapes is the result of intertwined civilizations. Architectural insight helps to construct the distinctive features of the novel in the attempt to create modes and channels of expression that grant unlimited freedom. Music is the rhythm that configures the trajectory and reaches inaccessible depths of our emotions.

I hear the ḥadū, the voice of the camel helps it in crossing distances through nostalgia. I can hear it in the Portuguese Fado. In Bamberg Germany, I listened to music inhabited by traces of old Andalusian musical groups that used to travel throughout Europe. I journey with the rhythm. In the nawba of Lovers, one of the eleven complete nawbas preserved by Moroccan heritage, I perceive the advance of existence through time from one hour to another, each hour has its own melody. The music of traveling Gypsies which flows with longing to an imagined homeland entices me. It brings to my mind the exalting Blues. Wherever a human being chants or touches the string of an instrument, he or she launches a melody into my heart and a cadence to my feelings that acts upon me. This is how the beating of Destiny in Beethoven’s 5th symphony illuminates me. As for the sonatas and quartets, they take me to the doorsteps of the Futūḥāt Al-Makkīyya and the great Sheikh. I see him when he departs from Murcia in Andalusia heading for the East to spend thirty years in travel. He baffles us. How did he travel? In what circumstances did he write this encyclopedia whose hidden secrets are not totally revealed yet— a journey within a
journey, what a wonder.

What bewilders him bewilders me. In writing, I seek the answer… the answer.

My destiny is to seek what baffles me between the shadow and its origin, between the boundary between one color and another. What I can't grasp yet is what happens between one moment and another. It is time—my earthly progress that has been guided by one question: Where did yesterday go?

Writing is still my salvation from torment, from dazzling perplexity. For me, writing is an attempt to grasp, if it is possible to grasp. Is writing a form of self-innovation, a new rebirth?

When the night fell, I was Eastern, and when the morning came, I became Western.

Yes, my master, yes, o my master Jalāl ad-Dīn. The East was never isolated, hidden from the West even in the periods of clash. The spiritual foundation is unified in its roots that stretch from Egypt to Babylon.

From Egypt, the wisdom moved to Greece. I find in the symbols of Christianity the ancient Egyptian truth. The roots of Judaism stretch to the banks of the Nile, and between the two rivers, Dijlah and Furat. And whoever has a deep knowledge of Islam will find it to be the extension of these visions and messages. Interaction was never an obstacle. On the opposite, it was always the catalyst of progress. In the Abbasid era, in the 2nd Century Hijra, the 9th Century AD, the Caliph al-Ma’mun founded the Bayt al-Hikma in Baghdad. Various scholars from different religious backgrounds—from Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Mandaeism—contributed in enriching it. These scholars translated from ancient Greek, from Aramaic, from Syriac. Until now the translations of Plato and Aristotle are the ones that are available and known to us in Arabic. In Cairo, the Dar al-Hikma was founded under the Fatimid Caliphate, and was specialized in translating books of philosophy and medicine, notably from Greek. The vast movement of translation from ancient languages contributed to Islamic civilization. Every civilization is the culmination of other civilizations. Everything derives some of its parts from something else, in all directions, even in ancient, unknown civilizations.

The modern age witnessed a large translation movement and various attempts to connect with the Western civilization. It took place in Egypt and the Levant, specifically in the beginning of the 19th century with Muhammad Ali Pasha’s efforts to found the Egyptian state. The most important encounter between East and West, despite its rootedness in violence—I mean the French conquest of Egypt—revealed the halting of Azhar scholars before the manifestations of modern science. Some of them, however, had prior knowledge of these manifestations, such as the Sheikh Hassan Attar, the professor of Rifa’a al-Tahtawi. These scholars halted in front of electricity, the hot air balloon, and other manifestations of foreign culture.

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a cultural connection in the south of the Mediterranean, specifically Egypt and Europe, through the envoys by Muhammad Ali
Pasha to France, Italy, Austria, England, and Russia. These envoys included all specialties from irrigation to astronomy, from industry to compiling and publishing books. When the Sheikh Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi returned from France, he founded The School of Languages, which continues to function until today. This movement of translation from European languages was a model for creative interaction. It was the cornerstone of the construction of a modern state and it is still essential in our time. In the year 1840, colonial powers mobilized to stop the growth of the Egyptian state under Muhammad Ali Pasha. Western fleets allied against the Egyptian fleet in the Battle of Navarino in 1840. In 1882, in response to the rebellion of Ahmed Orabi, the British army attacked Egypt and an occupation began that lasted for 70 years and was ended in the July Revolution of 1952. History teaches us that terms and names are not totally exact. There is no absolute East. There is no absolute West. The lawyer who defended Ahmed Orabi was a great British man named Bradley. In the West, there are intellectuals and ordinary people who are closer to me than some of my fellow citizens. What is important is that human beings gather around values of progress and freedom, that we resist oppression regardless of its source, especially the fascist type that parades in the garb of religion. A great amount of misunderstanding befell our two peoples and their aspiring objectives to reach an honorable life, void of dogmatism. There are sometimes stumblings along this path, there are looming aspects of this misunderstanding that are intentional. I mean the faulty policies of superpowers. I mean politics of our time and not the people. Whenever I come across misunderstanding from those from whom we expect justice to be served, I remember Walt Whitman, "Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me, why should you not speak to me? And why should I not speak to you?" I also remember what the Great Sheikh said, the greatest among my guides and Sheikhs, Muhyiddin ibn Ḥaṣan ‘Arabi, I still repeat what he said eight centuries ago:

My heart has become receptive of every form:
it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,
and a temple for idols and the Kaaba for pilgrims
and tablets of the Torah and the book of the Quran.
I profess the religion of Love, wherever its caravan is headed
for Love is my religion and my faith.