

Two Critique After the 1967 Defeat

The Existential Dramatization of Critique the Day After the Defeat: Saadallah Wannous's Theatrical Oeuvre

An Entertainment Evening for June 5

Saadallah Wannous's 1967–1968 play *Haflat Samar min Ajl Khamseh Hu-zairan* (An Entertainment Evening for June 5) is about the opening night of a play called *Safir al-Arwah* (The Whistle of the Souls) that never actually gets started.¹ The opening takes place in a state theater in the aftermath of the June 1967 war. Official personalities as well as common people and refugees are invited. They have settled down in their seats waiting for the play to start. Both the stage and the spectator hall are lit, the curtain is up, and a blackboard on the stage reads: "At exactly quarter to nine in the morning of June 5, 1967, the state of Israel, representing the fiercest and most dangerous forms of world imperialism, launched a stupefying attack

on the Arab countries. It defeated them and occupied a new part of their land. While this attack showed clearly the brutality and dangers of imperialism, it showed even more clearly our need to see ourselves, to look into our mirrors and ask: Who are we? And why?"²

After waiting for some time, the spectators become impatient and start shouting their anger at the delay, making mocking remarks such as "Is this an imperialist conspiracy?" "Have actors lost their roles?" "Is there a backstage crisis?" Finally, the director of the play appears on stage and addresses the public. The director, adds Wannous in his introductory remarks, is, as is customary in "our" country (meaning Syria, but also any other Arab country), also the director of the theater as well as the director of all the plays presented in it, alluding to the pattern of cumulating and monopolizing power. The director apologizes to the public and proposes to explain the reason for the delay and the confusion. He says that he wanted to produce an artistic event that would honor the dramatic circumstances the country was experiencing, that he first thought of a poetry evening, but then realized that people did not like poetry anymore. He then decided to offer a play, but having failed to find a suitable play in the available repertoire, he commissioned a writer to compose one for him that would express the scenes he envisioned. After they had come to mutual agreement on the text, the writer had at the very last minute, just before this evening's show, refused to allow the representation of his piece to take place—hence the delay and the confusion. The director starts to narrate his initial meeting with the writer as well as the three main scenes he had suggested. His narration is accompanied by the live representations of the meeting and of the scenes. For the first representation, the writer joins him on stage, commenting sarcastically on the flow of the narration. The spectators also make comments on the unfolding of the evening and on the opinions of the director, who wanted a dramatic representation of history on stage.

He tells the story of the three scenes: the first one is set on a city street, the second one on a battlefield, and the third in a front-line village square. In the first scene, people are seen panicking at the sound of sirens, raiding planes, and radio announcements broadcasting the news of the war: children are crying, and people seem to be totally disoriented. In response to the description of this scene, a spectator comments that this was not how things had happened, to which the director answers that what counts for him is not the scene's veracity, but the emotional buildup to the next scene at the battlefield. With the growing sound of explosions and whistling shells and bullets, four soldiers appear on stage showing a heroic confrontation

with danger and death, making lyrical statements about their epic defense of their country. But the soldiers playing these roles also speak about the lack of adequate command and communication in their troops, the superiority of the enemy weaponry, their fears and more mundane concerns, their letters to their families, their conflicts with their parents concerning their love relationships, and so on. Although the director finds these concerns futile and unbecoming of the heroic situation in which soldiers are to stand for the patriotic defense of the country, the writer reminds him of the soldiers' humanness. Uninterested in such considerations, the director moves on to his third scene, which portrays people in a front-line village faced with a dramatic dilemma—having to choose between fleeing from the approaching enemy and abandoning their lands or staying on their lands and dying in defense of their rights and properties. The set on stage is immediately changed at this point, and a village square is set up; two groups of villagers are shown in a heated debate about the pros and cons of each option. Finally, one group decides to leave, and the other chooses to stay. The men of the latter group kill their womenfolk and children in order to be able to face the enemy without fear of shame and dishonor. The scene is to end, the director says, with the crescendo of dramatic music and with the curtain falling slowly. "This was my idea of this evening's show," he adds.

Then, in almost simultaneous but parallel monologues, the director and the writer give their versions of the development of the project. Abandoning his sarcasm, the writer explains in a sad tone how he first got carried away in this project, despite his doubts and hesitations. He says how amazed he was that things continued to look the same after the war, how words continued to be used in the same way, how people wrote, read, and behaved as if nothing had happened. At first, he thought that his own malaise with words after the war might have been unjustified, so he went along with the director's project and wrote the play for him until he realized how rotten and inadequate the words in it were and how impossible it was for him to let them be spoken on stage. To the director, who commented that the war and its heroism had surely invigorated the writer's talent and filled him with inspiration, he says that the defeat had in truth crippled his imagination and impoverished his words. The director, in contrast, relates the promising cooperation he at first had with the writer and the bitter disappointment he experienced when the latter betrayed his commitment at the last minute. He concludes by announcing that in compensation for the thwarted evening, a folkloric dance would be presented. The dance,

performed in the village setting of the last scene, is meant to fill everybody with the nostalgia of old rural feasts and to celebrate the glory of heroic deeds.

As the musicians and the dancers prepare to start, an old man in traditional village clothes rises from the back rows and heads toward the director, asking him candidly what the name of the village he represented was. The director explains to him condescendingly and impatiently that it is not a real village, but a symbolic village, standing for all of the country's villages, that the story is not a real one, but a symbolic representation of what the war stands for. "So," the old man asks, surprised, "you don't know the village you are talking about?" The director cannot be bothered by this man's remarks; he is anxious to have the dance begin. But the man persists, recalling his memories. In simple and humble terms, contrasting with the lyrical and emphatic terms of the director's narration, he says how vividly the village scene brought back to him the experiences of his own village: how they fled in panic, not understanding what was happening to them. They were unprepared, unguided, and abandoned, just like the soldiers they met as they fled. As the old man continues his story, the director attempts to silence him, finding no relevance in his utterances, but some spectators and the writer insist that he pursue his story. To a fellow villager, the old man says that people do not want to listen to them because they are strangers and because they own nothing, that people do not want to hear the complaint of their humiliation as refugees living in tents because they had not lived in palaces before the war anyway. Yes, he objects, they had not lived in palaces, but they had lived in dignity in their own modest houses and villages, led wars against other villages in forms that were familiar to them, unlike this war that they could not understand and could not participate in. As the old man returns to his seat, silenced by the growing sound of the music, another spectator surprises everybody by addressing the villager in anger, asking him why they fled and did not stay on their lands. More and more spectators leave their seats and move toward the stage, participating in the debate that becomes increasingly animated, despite the director's continuous objections as he loses control over his own stage and theater.

The old man is surprised that he can be asked such a question. Someone in the audience objects to the question, but another thinks that it is an essential question. When the director asks them to go and raise their questions elsewhere, people tell him to take his folkloric group to countries where there were no problems and no refugee tents, that in this country

there were people who had left their villages and that people needed to understand why. They also tell him that his anger is due to the fact that he himself had never been a spectator and that he had become accustomed to silent and passive audiences that he controlled. The question is asked once again: "Why did you leave your villages?" The old man answers candidly:

War was waged, how could we stay? Nobody explained anything to us, nobody ever talked to us or visited us. We heard the radio, but did not understand what was being said. Poor people like us are not visited by anyone, except by policemen and tax collectors. The teachers who are sent to our villages do not like us and do everything to be moved elsewhere. Only one day did a real man visit us. He carried a gun, but was not a soldier. He was a peasant like us, dispossessed of his land by enemies who had come from overseas. He told us how he was prevented by his own rulers from seeking justice and reclaiming his rights. He explained to us how our leaders kept us poor, ignorant, and humiliated so that we remain helpless. He spoke in terms that we understood. He moved on in his struggle, and we never saw him again.

The questioner adds, "But I know poor peasants who were able to stand in the face of a major aggression." Somebody in the audience says, "He is talking about the Vietnamese." The old villager answers, "We don't hear about far away countries." Different spectators interject, and one of them remarks, "Those Vietnamese are able to struggle because they are not strangers in their own country, because they don't live marginalized and neglected, because they have an identity, and because they know they have an identity; their leaders are not tanks, their palace windows are not canons, and their balconies are not information posts; they learn how to move around, and they learn how the world around them moves; their teachers are not crooks, their radios do not broadcast lies, and their newspapers are not futile."

At this point, a spectator erupts in anger and says that the villagers' flight was also everyone's, that all were responsible for it, that if he looked in the mirror, he could see the shame of that flight within himself. A number of spectators welcome the idea of exploring their images in a mirror and insist on the importance of examining themselves before assigning blame to others. One of them says that what he sees is a defeated people. Another says that one needs to look deeper, beneath the defeat, into the very being of the people, and that on that deep level what one would see is

nothingness, erased pictures, mere shadows without features: "That is what we are," he adds, "images that have been erased in the name of national interest. Year after year we have lost our tongues, our ears, our eyes to what was claimed to be our national interest. Year after year questioning, seeing, and thinking were regarded as punishable crimes in the face of a national interest that was defended in dark dungeons. What is left in a picture in which the tongue, the eyes, and the ears are erased? We have become pale shadows. The world moves around us like bad dreams, blurred and obscure. Our history is a burden and our land slips away from under our feet."

"Still," somebody in the audience protests, "even if we had no features left in ourselves, we were still able to sense the coming dangers, like animals in the forest. We did sense the danger, and we did want to do something to face it and to bear responsibility." "But what good is it to want to act," someone else asks, "if we have no faculties left in us, no contours, no identity? What good is our will if our character is considered to be a conspiracy by those in power?" Others recall the day the attack was broadcast: how people took to the streets, how women and men offered what they had to stand in the face of the aggression. They were sent back home and told that the war was none of their business. "Our mistake," says another, "was to ask for weapons to fight, not for our eyes, not for our tongues, not for our right to think, not for our right to exist with identifiable features. Erased pictures we remained, incapacitated and defeated." At this point, an official from the front row gives orders to a number of his men to lock the exits and arrest those who had spoken and even those who had not.

What Wannous puts on stage here is the profound malaise of a majority of Arabs in the aftermath of the 1967 war: people overwhelmed by humiliation, disappointment, anger, and fear. With his inimitable honesty and lucidity, he depicts a malaise caused primarily, in his opinion, by state repression and manifested in military defeat, but also in cultural mediocrity, intellectual futility, and personal despair. As he saw the situation, cultural malaise, as a symptom of political repression, can be overcome only by a cultural critique that slowly and gradually paves the way for a democratic struggle. He regarded theater as an important milieu of cultural and political critique and so developed his notion of "politicizing theater."

Politicizing Theater

Oppression, violent subjugation, exploitation, mendacity, deception, demagoguery, and empty lyricism are the persisting concerns of Saadallah Wannous's

(1941–1997) dramatic oeuvre, which consists of some two dozen plays. Many have been translated into foreign languages, including French, English, Spanish, Italian, German, Russian, and Polish. For more than three decades, the prominent Syrian playwright denounced these abuses of power and fought for the empowerment and liberation of his fellow Arabs. He studied journalism in Cairo and visited France, Germany, and Russia to study theater and participate in directing some of his plays. His plays were presented all over the Arab world, often provoking very heated debates about both their content and their form. He worked as a journalist and critic in Damascus and Beirut and wrote on both Arab and foreign theater and culture.

In the early 1970s, he wrote “Bayanat li Masrah ‘Arabi Jadid” (Manifestos for a New Arab Theater),³ in which he articulated his conception of the role and nature of the new theater he wanted to create. For Wannous, theater is primarily a relational phenomenon—a living dialogue and a live interaction between actors and spectators. It is the privileged space in which both parties share a moment of critical reflection on the sociopolitical and historical realities of their lives. The main questions that a serious theater should raise, according to him, are: Who is the public that the theater is addressing? What does the theater want to convey to this public? And how does it want to convey these things? The answers to these questions are to be searched for continuously and are bound to change with changing historical situations. The purpose of this theatrical relationship is to offer the public an opportunity to contemplate the realities of its environment, to develop a critical awareness of its main issues, and to help mobilize its energies toward changing those realities. The primary public Wannous has in mind is the common people, not the elite, and the change he wants to advocate is a progressive one—a change toward democracy and social justice. This is his understanding of the “politicizing” theater that he defends in “Manifestos,” and it is not to be confused, he insists, with “political” theater that simply has politics as its topic. Politicizing theater is not to transmit a ready-made awareness. The aim is not to exchange one ideology with another, but to create an opportunity for people to form their own critical view of the most pressing sociopolitical issues. He admits that he may not always meet this standard in his own plays, but he affirms that it remains his main aspiration. The purpose is to shake up mentalities and encourage change.

More than any other artistic and intellectual activity, theater is first and foremost a public social event, says Wannous. It is not a mere text that can be smuggled. Therefore, it is particularly sensitive to the absence of liberties.

Democracy and freedom of thought are necessary for the public critique and dialogue that is theater. According to him, the blatant absence of democracy in the Arab world is one of the major factors causing the crisis of Arab theater, manifested in its lack of audacity in addressing pressing issues, the weakness of its intellectual and aesthetic forms, and its general mediocrity of production. Another factor, he adds, is the acceleration of real drama in the Arab world—that is, the intense succession of dramatic events throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The rapidity of these events has not left much time or opportunity to grasp them and to ponder their effects and implications. Still another problematic factor, he points out, is the quality of the media culture that Arab governments have been propagating in order to numb people’s taste and critical faculties. It is against such formidable obstacles, he says, that a politicizing theater is to be created as an art that is liberating in its intellectual depth and honesty, its political progressive commitment, its innovative aesthetics, and its effectiveness in engaging a specific public about real issues.

This effectiveness is what makes a theater authentic, not the origin of its text. Creating an authentic Arab theater does not necessarily mean drawing texts from the transmitted heritage, the *turath*. Although Wannous often drew the plots and subjects of his plays from this heritage, he did not do so in order to make of this heritage reference an end in itself. More than the text itself, what counted for him is the way issues are addressed and dealt with. Moreover, texts are constantly open to new readings in light of the circumstances in which they are understood and presented. In this sense, adaptation from foreign plays is not necessarily an obstacle to an authentic theater. Most repertoires in the world, he says in “Manifestos,” include a certain number of adaptations. Rather than confining itself to an isolated *turath*, Arab theater should open itself to world theater and culture. Authentic theater has to be local, but not exclusively or necessarily in a geographical sense. What counts is not the story of a play. The ancient Greeks, he adds, did not watch their famous plays to find out about the fate of Achilles or Agamemnon. That fate was already known to them. With every new enactment of those stories, they watched to contemplate the relevance of these stories to their own lives. It is futile to oppose Arab theater to European theater, he says, for there is no one monolithic European theater, but a whole array of different currents and traditions that belong to specific sociocultural histories. The authenticity of Arab theater can only come from the authenticity of the issues it addresses and the effectiveness of the forms it uses in engaging its public. In this respect, Arab theater can

only be experimental, he adds—not in the European sense of going beyond the limits of classical, bourgeois theater, but in the sense of involving a constant search for means of effective interaction with the public, which can often be found in the habits of the people themselves.

This was the idea behind the setting of *Entertainment Evening for June 5*: a setting in which people interject, comment, and participate, like they do in entertainment evenings (*samar*) in which chatting and singing are mixed. The play was banned for a while, then performed in the Sudan (1970), Lebanon (1970), Syria (1971), Iraq (1972), and Algeria (1972). It was well received, but Wannous was disappointed that it did not produce the political effect he thought it should. People left it like they would from any other play, not at all mobilized in the way he had hoped they would be. Many years later, in the concluding piece of the section of his analytic writing devoted to theater, “Al-Hulm Yatada’a” (The Dream Collapses),⁴ he states that he came to accept that a play can only be a play, not a revolution, and that words can only be words. After the 1967 defeat, he wondered what relevance writing could still have; he wanted to hold on to the belief in a deed-word, in a deed-theater, in an effective art that could create changes by addressing realities with honesty and depth. In 1971, with Syrian filmmaker Omar Amiralay he made the film *Al-Hayat al-Yawmiyya fi Qarya Suriyya* (Daily Life in a Syrian Village). It depicts, as the title says, the ordinary life of people in a village in northeastern Syria. The Syrian authorities immediately banned it.

“I Am the Deceased and the Mourner”

Wannous’s disappointments were to grow regarding both the effectiveness of his art and the political realities of the Arab world. They reached their climax in 1978 with the Camp David Agreement.⁵ He perceived it as the ultimate betrayal of the Arab cause by a corrupt and dictatorial Arab regime, a regime that had contributed to the further fragmentation and division of the Arab world, more underdevelopment, more poverty, and more humiliation. In the same year, he wrote a piece in the Lebanese daily *al-Safir* entitled “Ana al-Janaza wa al-Mushayyi’un” (I Am the Deceased and the Mourner):

My life has neared its end and I still dream of saying “No.” I wanted, and I want to say “No” to the “Yes” citizen, to the prison-homeland, to the modernization of the methods of torture and domestication, to the official discourse, to the visas for Arab countries, to the fragmen-

tation and the division, to the referenda of 99.99 percent, to the balloon celebrations, to the wars that strengthen the police, to the victories which offer the leadership of the Arabs to the oil princes, that increase the gains of the businessmen, and lead to the agreements of Camp David. . . .

I wanted and I want to say “No.” And I search for my tongue but find only a foam of blood and fear.

From my severed tongue the defeat started, and the funeral procession set out. . . . From my suppressed “No” the enemy got through, as well as the separation, the poverty, the hunger, the prison, the torturer, and the contemporary Arab collapse. . . .

Briefly, if it weren’t for my suppressed “No,” half of me wouldn’t be in the coffin and the other half dragging itself behind it. And my deprivation from my “No” made me not only into the victim and the spectator, the dead and the mourner, but also into a conspirator. . . .

. . . [T]he “No” citizen is, for the Arab thrones, a bigger danger than the Israeli danger, and a conspiracy worse than the imperialist conspiracies. . . .

. . . And until I recuperate my suppressed “No,” the funeral procession will continue, with us dragging our tails behind it.⁶

After this, he produced little for a number of years. His silence lasted till the mid-1980s. In the 1997 interview Omar Amiralay filmed as Wannous was in the hospital for the final stages of the cancer treatment he had undergone for many years before his death that year, the ailing playwright related in sober and sincere words how he had contemplated suicide during those years of his life following the Camp David Agreement (the early 1980s) as he saw all his dreams and projects collapse.⁷ Ten years earlier, in a 1986 interview, he had explained how this severe crisis had led him eventually to deepen his self-examination and to resume, with more modesty but more determinacy, the struggle for truthfulness and liberty.⁸ This struggle may seem less ambitious, he added, than working to establish the unity of the Arab world, creating a modern state, liberating Palestine, and achieving socialism, but it is in the long run more urgent and more fundamental: it is

the struggle for enlightenment. The place of culture in society needs to be reconsidered. Culture needs to be liberated from narrow politics, without becoming a futile entertainment for the elite or a mediocre activity for the masses. Culture is to be the privileged domain of enlightenment and critical thinking. In 1996, he was asked to write the speech for World Theater Day, organized since 1962 by UNESCO's International Theater Institute. He called it "Al-Ju' ila al-Hiwar" (The Hunger for Dialogue).⁹ In this speech, he pleaded, as he had done throughout the past three decades, for dialogue among individuals and groups, and he insisted once more on the need for democracy and pluralism. Dialogue, he said, can start from theater, where it can take place on numerous levels: between the actors and the spectators, between the theater and the city, and between the spectators themselves. But Wannous was always afraid that the people, himself included, having been subjected all their lives to dictatorships, had become small dictators, seeking approval and applause, intolerant and deaf to others. He emphasized the importance of being aware of and overcoming this internalized tendency to authoritarian monologuing. "We are condemned to hope," he said; "this cannot be the end of history."

Revisiting the Nahda

The struggle against despair and resignation increasingly became Wannous's most urgent existential and political task. The intellectual core of this struggle was the need to make enlightenment possible and sustainable despite the sociopolitical obstacles and in the midst of an extremely difficult historical situation. Significant efforts toward enlightenment had been deployed for almost a whole century since the first Nahda. None of that momentum seemed left in the late twentieth century, however. What had severed the last decades of the twentieth century from this legacy of critical thinking? What had prevented the legacy's fruition? Why had modern Arab thought found itself in a hopeless redundancy, raising the same questions it had raised at the beginning of the Nahda, but with less liberty and less clarity? Why do contemporary Arab thinkers feel unable to rely on that legacy and to build on it? Why do they have the impression of always having to start from scratch in the total absence of a cumulative critical heritage? From the mid-1980s onward, Wannous focused much of his writing on these questions. In 1990, together with Abde al-Rahman Munif, Faysal al-Darraj, and Gaber Asfour, he launched a periodical devoted to the renewed study of that Nahda, *Qadaya wa Shahadat* (Causes and Testimonies).¹⁰ Its purpose, as he put it in the introduction of the first issue,

was not to cover the present intellectual bankruptcy with a few symbolic figures of that period or to indulge in compensatory nostalgia, but to reconnect with an intellectual legacy that had become more relevant than ever. The periodical was to engage in a reflective dialogue about this relevance and in a search for the reasons for the rupture that prevented the continuation of its impetus, but it was discontinued after the seventh issue because of the deterioration of Wannous's health in the mid-1990s.

In the journal, Wannous wrote on Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Khairuddin al-Tunisi, Taha Husayn, and Sayyid Qutb, and analyzed the power structure of the postindependence governments that in his opinion had wasted the fruition of their legacy. What he underlines in al-Tahtawi's thought is its focus on change and progress inspired from the French model he saw during his stay in Paris from 1826 to 1831 as head of the student mission sent by Muhammad Ali, governor of Egypt at the time. His mind, says Wannous, was free from polemics and apologetics. He was eager to understand the basic principles that had led to the cultural, socioeconomic, and political progress of Europe in general and of France in particular. Al-Tahtawi was fascinated by the principles of law, reason, freedom, and patriotism that gave rise to a homeland that ensured rights and protected liberties. He saw the linkage between the epistemological and the political systems of that homeland and understood the need to borrow both. He was well aware of the conservative reaction in his native Egypt and addressed their concerns without spending his whole energy arguing with them. Al-Tahtawi, a sheikh himself, says Wannous, read the sacred text in light of the progressive models he experienced abroad and made the theological notions fit into these models rather than the other way around. He advocated education for all, including young girls and women, laypeople as well as clerics and scholars of religion. In a modern state, he thought, religious education is not enough to enlighten citizens because the laws of such a state cannot all be based on religious jurisprudence. He saw the importance of education in changing society and in leading to a modern representative political system. What strikes Wannous is the serenity with which al-Tahtawi perceived the foreign advanced model and the freedom with which he reasoned and pleaded for change—characteristics that fade with time as we near the postindependence era. Wannous sees three reasons for al-Tahtawi's confident attitude: (1) his affiliation with the leadership of Muhammad Ali, who was adamant about modernizing Egypt, primarily in the administrative and military sectors—a modernization process that inevitably produced changes in the other sectors, including the cultural; (2) the fact that

Muhammad Ali had subdued the conservative religious groups and institutions by confiscating their properties and marginalizing their power; and (3) the fact that European colonial aggression had not yet expanded in the region and thus had not yet created, according to Wannous, great confusion and skepticism regarding the validity and legitimacy of the modernization project.

In the work of the Tunisian reformer of the 1860s, Khaireddin al-Tunisi, Wannous appreciates the early and clear warning against separating the Europe of reason, science, and industry from the Europe of goods consumption. Already then, al-Tunisi had seen the danger of rejecting the first in the name of identity and religion and accepting the latter in view of modernizing the external aspects of life.¹¹ Doing either would create, according to him, the worst kind of dependency and underdevelopment: it would lead to an economic state of subservience and deprive the region of the principles of reason and freedom indispensable for progress because of an erroneous defensive logic of cultural particularity. Sadly, adds Wannous, al-Tunisi's fears were increasingly justified, especially under the postindependence governments. Both al-Tahtawi and al-Tunisi, he says, understood that the principles of European modernity did not clash with Arab identities, but rather with the interests of the ruling elites. These elites compensated for their popular illegitimacy and political ineptitude with a political and economic subservience to foreign powers; and they covered themselves by propagating an ideology of national and religious authenticity. Salafi thought itself, by insisting on a selective borrowing from the West based on the distinction between an acceptable technological transfer and a cultural exchange prohibited in the name of a return to the purity of religious origins, has provided a most dangerous justification for economic dependence and political oppression.

For Wannous, what is also remarkable in al-Tahtawi and al-Tunisi's thoughts is their rootedness in the historical realities of their times. Their ideas encompassed the cultural as well as the political, the intellectual as well as the historical. As intellectuals, these thinkers were integrated in their societies and were not marginalized like the intellectuals of the late twentieth century. The same could be said about the Nahda pioneers of Arab theater, such as Marun Naqqash (1816–1817 to 1954–1955) and Ya'qub Sannu' (1839–1912). Their plays, according to Wannous, had a greater impact on their audiences, in spite of a literacy rate lower than in our times, because they were clearer in addressing their societies' concerns. They are today criticized for having made loose adaptations and even distorting pieces

of the world repertoire by taking too many liberties and using them for their own purposes.¹² And yet, for Wannous, their theater was more effective because it was not a detached intellectual or even academic activity, but a social and political activity in the first place.

Attempts at explaining the failure of the Nahda enlightenment project usually point out its lack of radicality, its Europeanized estrangement from its environment, its weak cognitive basis, and its confinement to a certain upper social class. Rather than restricting the matter exclusively to the intellectual sphere, asserts Wannous, we should seek answers in the interface among the political, economic, and social spheres. After the death of Muhammad Ali and the rise of Abdulhamid to the Ottoman throne, the modernization process came to a halt in Egypt. The country drowned in huge external debts, and the Salafis regained power and influence. More important, colonialism began to tear apart not only the region's social and economic structures, but also the knowledge and awareness of the Nahda thinkers. Colonial aggression resulted in prejudice regarding the European model of enlightenment and created ambiguities and suspicions with respect to the whole Nahda project. Both secularists and enlightened Islamic thinkers found their proposals caught in the double standards of a Europe that both championed supposedly universal enlightenment principles and at the same time led colonial wars. This confusion contributed to the strengthening of the conservative reaction. The colonial aggression blurred the Nahda problematic further by setting the terms of the confrontation, the Christian Europe versus the Muslim Orient, at a time when Christianity was definitely not the primary motive of this colonial Europe. The Arabs themselves, especially the Salafis, adapted these colonial terms, which were then used to redefine the Nahda problematic in terms of the old and the new, the pious and the irreligious.

Despite this confusion, some thinkers pursued the Nahda project. For Wannous, Taha Husayn's work is among the most radical enlightenment accomplishments. He summarizes the main features of Husayn's achievement in five points. First, by critically studying the literary tradition and deconstructing some of the most established beliefs about it, Husayn desecralized *turath* and moved it from the metaphysicotheological domain to the historical one. By unveiling the untenable arguments supporting the existence of pre-Islamic poetry as it had come to be assumed until then, he questioned the sacred and relativized the absolute, noting especially that many of the arguments he was deconstructing were found in the Qur'an. For him, all the inherited legacy, including the sacred book, was open to

the free investigation of the critical mind and subject to open debate. No one today, says Wannous, would have the freedom and audacity to undertake publicly such a critique. Second, Husayn faced the religious institutions and their conservatism. He criticized the Azhar's outmoded and narrow educational system as well as the traditional Islamic scholars' intolerant ignorance. He believed that religion had become a tool of terror in the hands of power, and he clearly advocated the separation of state from religion. Third, he believed in the unity of human culture, a unity that does not deny the specificities of individual cultures. He recognized the Greek and Roman influences on Egyptian and Arab cultures. He believed in the unity of human reason, and the Europe he wanted to adopt was the Europe of the Enlightenment. Fourth, he saw that his enlightenment project required a sociopolitical ground without which it could not be carried out. For him, it was clear that there could be no reason and no science without freedom, no freedom without secularism, and no secularism without a modern state, public education, and democracy. And fifth, Husayn practiced what he believed in and carried out his project as much as he could as the head of the Education Ministry and in all the positions he came to hold during his lifetime.

It is not a surprise, adds Wannous, that this man could not accept the July revolution of 1952 that brought Gamal Abdel Nasser to power in Egypt. From then on, Husayn was marginalized, and, instead of flourishing, his project was brought to a halt. The conservatives of the time depicted him as an intellectual feudal, and the progressive thinkers did not embrace his project, preferring the contentment provided by the ready answers of superficial ideology. In spite of the 1952 revolution's achievements, Wannous thinks it paved the way for the failures that followed by disenfranchising the people, confiscating political work, and adopting a conciliatory thought that shunned any real and radical confrontation with ideology.

The Nahda thinkers, according to Wannous, may not have left us final and complete answers, but their courage in raising fundamental questions, their freedom in searching for answers, and the rootedness of their intellectual work in the sociopolitical realities of their times should remain for us valuable sources of inspiration. If colonialism was the phenomenon that thwarted enlightenment efforts at the turn of the twentieth century, the postindependence state was the factor that crushed these same efforts even more forcefully in the second half of the twentieth century. It is important, says Wannous, to analyze the power structure of the petty bourgeoisie governments of this epoch because it is this structure that severed the line of

earlier enlightenment activity and strangled critical thinking through political oppression. The postindependence state failed to modernize in any real way, failed to defend successfully the national causes, failed to promote healthy and fair prosperity, failed to ensure its citizens' freedom and dignity. It instrumentalized cultural issues to the benefit of its power needs by creating fake problematics, like that of "authenticity versus contemporaneity." It championed an ideological and superficial authenticity even while it indulged in economic dependence on the West.

In addition to all these failures and not unrelated to them were the many military and political defeats of the second half of the twentieth century, the many revolutions crushed by colonial, neocolonial, and Zionist pressures. In view of so many defeats, escape from reality, whether in the form of an illusory attachment to an idealized golden past or the confident expectation of a predetermined glorious future, is a great temptation, but also an ultimate defeat, according to Wannous. And it is this ultimate defeat that he calls upon thinkers of the late twentieth century to prevent: the awareness of the defeat should not deteriorate into a defeated awareness, as Syrian Marxist thinker Yassin Hafez (1930–1978) might put it.¹³ Even if the struggle is Sisyphean because of the present circumstances, intellectuals have to carry on the task of reflecting critically on reality and thinking from within history. Historical awareness and historical thinking are for Wannous one of the most important forms of critical thinking necessary for enlightenment—hence, his admiration for the work of Qustantin Zurayq and Abdallah Laroui, which I examine later in this chapter.

The scope of despair and humiliation is such, Wannous says, that it is not easy to resist the recourse to *turath* used as an incantation or to withstand the lure of an inexorably glorious Islam, untouched by the vicissitudes of concrete history. It is on this desperate need to escape reality that Islamist thinking feeds. The thought of Sayyid Qutb is a good illustration of such ahistorical thinking, according to Wannous. In its cyclical view of history, Islam is bound to regain power in order to patronize humanity and to lay the ground for divine governance. By turning Islam into an abstract, ahistorical ideology, this view produces spiritual poverty, nurtures religious and confessional conflicts, provides a logic of power and oppression, puts reason on the decline, and imposes "absolute truth" instead of opening possibilities of dialogue and tolerance. This assessment was confirmed by the behavior of Islamist groups in the 1980s and 1990s, thinks Wannous. The rise of such groups is surely a complex phenomenon that needs to be analyzed from many angles, but one thing is clear: they are as

oppressive as the oppressive regimes they want to replace. They are in many ways a reaction and a product of these despotic regimes, but what they have to offer is just another form of oppression, this time in the name of God. Given a choice between an oppressive earthly god and a merciful heavenly God, people, in their despair, might be tempted to opt for the latter, especially after having been for a long time conditioned to obey. This militant Islamism hides the real problems of society, however, and paves the way for more dependency: first, by widening further the gap between the internal cultural and religious authenticity, on the one hand, and the external westernization of consumption and transfer of technology, on the other; and second, by prioritizing as its initial task the conversion and reform of fellow Muslims—a priority that suits the exploiting foreign powers well. As a result, this Islamist revolution can only solidify the power structure of the regimes it wants to fight and replace because what it has to offer is in reality more oppression, more dependency, and more parochialism. The mistake, says Wannous, is to think that this type of reactionary thinking will wither away by itself by becoming obsolete and that the manifestations of the petty bourgeois power structure will be temporary deviations and aberrations. Today, more than ever, this type of thinking and this mode of exercising power need to be squarely confronted.

Against this reactionary Islamist thinking, Wannous underlines his belief that the future cannot be found in the past and that Arabs have to reaffiliate themselves with the rest of humanity, with universal history and universal culture. In his reading of the second half of the twentieth century, Wannous concludes that the problem of enlightenment in the Arab world is not cultural, but political. The cultural component is one aspect of a more general national problem caused by political oppression—an oppression that erases faces and people, as he articulated in his 1967 play. Throughout his life, he insisted with growing emphasis on the importance of recognizing political oppression as the fundamental problem of Arab societies, so he increasingly called for a struggle for democracy as a necessary basis for enlightenment. This understanding of the root of the malaise as a political problem due to oppression began, as we saw, with the early-modern reflections on backwardness and progress, on decline and renewal. With the colonial invasion of the region and then the establishment of the newly independent nation-states, the focus on local political justice seems to have been replaced with an urge to affirm a cultural authenticity and an urgency to form a state and a nation with a heavy authoritarian and voluntaristic hand. When disillusionment regarding the

postindependence states and governments set in, the concern for political justice and democracy once again came to the fore with increasing strength and determination. Whereas the 1970s and 1980s were dominated by culturalist concerns for heritage and authenticity, the 1990s were witnessing a growing preoccupation with the political.

It is indeed important to note that for about two centuries, thinkers in the Arab world have perceived and advocated with more or less urgency the centrality of political freedom for the multifaceted empowerment of their societies. In the postcolonial era, many Arab thinkers have tried to understand the way in which postindependence power structures confiscated this freedom. Their struggle, often under life-threatening conditions, has been to regain that freedom for themselves and for their fellow Arabs. This shift of emphasis from cultural identity to democracy appears in the works and debates I examine in this book. The 1967 defeat seems to have been the traumatic experience that laid bare the political realities of postindependence governments, a trauma exacerbated by the increasing sense of frustration in the face of growing Western hegemonies, ruthless forms of local repression, and the radicalization of militant fundamentalism. For many, the primary condition for any way out of the doom is the empowerment of the people through the recovery of civil and political liberties. Wannous's oeuvre offers a rich canvas of the main themes and issues of the growing Arab critique in the second half of the twentieth century that addressed the need for a renewed enlightenment, a rethinking of authenticity, an opening to the world, a revisiting of the Nahda, a recentering of attention on political oppression, and resistance of despair. The four thinkers I discuss next articulated this struggle differently in their different disciplines and with their different temperaments.

***Humanistic Nationalism and Critical Reason:
Qustantin Zurayq***

The Battle for Culture

Qustantin Zurayq (1909–2000) is among the most prominent thinkers who reflected critically on the intricate aspects of composing a cultural identity. His work, spanning the second half of the twentieth century, aimed at formulating a conception of Arab nationalism that was enlightened and humanistic rather than chauvinistic and defensive like the many pan-Arab, pan-Islamic, and regional nationalist ideologies of his time. His

Contemporary
Arab
Thought
*Cultural Critique
in Comparative
Perspective*
Elizabeth
Suzanne
Kassab

Columbia University Press
New York