Preservation and Change

On Emily Nasrallah's Dreams

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

In the beginning there was, and there is, meaning: there has always been the place, the location, *l'endroit* – and this place becomes home.

It has been there ever since we were born. We are born into it whether we like it or not. And the place is many things:

- It looks a certain way – it may be deep valleys or soft hills, high mountains or endless plains.

- It feels a certain way – it may experience mild breezes or icy snowstorms.

- It smells a certain way – of cow dung, garbage, car exhaust or the bakery next door.

- It has a certain plan – as a village made up of mud houses or a city with a silhouette of skyscrapers.

- It is organized a certain way – as part of an industrialized state, a rural community, a feudal society.

- It is populated a certain way – by a single tribe, several families or many culturally diverse groups.

The place / *l'endroit* is all that and much more: it is climate and family, flora and fauna, architecture and landscape. And we are not only born into it, we grow into it: we come to love it or hate it, to accept it or refuse it; we stay or we leave – and either for many reasons.

The place / *l'endroit* – once used as or turned into a literary location – may retain its proper, original "real" name and be given a topographically correct description, and then often many features of it can be recognized decades or even centuries after the author is no longer there. In Lübeck, a town of 200 000 inhabitants in the North of Germany and – maybe more important in our context – the stage of Thomas Mann's internationally known family novel "Die Buddenbrooks", the streets and some of the houses can still be visited and look exactly the way the author described them in his novel. The same is true for Honoré de Balzac and his Paris as well as for Charles Dickens and his London – and, of course, for the master of the Arabic novel and Nobel Prize winner of 1988, Naguib Mahfouz and his Cairo. The list of names of authors using not only the reality of a place but also its real name in their literary works could easily be extended.

But the "real" place may also disappear behind an invented name, maybe giving it even more visibility and more attention, allowing or encouraging readers to guess or, if need be, figure out where the place is located.

There is no place called Macondo outside the literary work of Gabriel Garcia Márquez, who in his "One Hundred Years of Solitude" uses this name for the village (presumably in Columbia, his country of origin), which is the center of action. Also, there is no region called Yoknapatawpha – I shall not venture to pronounce this name - which William Faulkner gave to the place or *endroit* where his novels are set, inspired by Lafayette County in Mississippi in the Southern US, where he himself grew up.

Of course, there is also no place called *al-Jûra* or, more precisely, *Jûrat as-sindiyân* (Pit of the holmoak) and yet the name pervades Emily Nasrallah's literary work – and some people know which place is meant, others don't care, and they don't have to because in the literary work the place stands for itself.

There is, however a place / village called Kfeir and it looks (or should I rather say: I suppose it looked?) very much like the *Jûrat as-sindiyân* in Emily's novels. Or is it the other way around, and it is *Jûrat as-sindiyân* that very much looks like the village called Kfeir?

It is there that life began. The author's life and the life of her works, or rather the persons that populate her stories, are rooted there. Mikha'îl Nuaima, whom you all know of course, raved about the description of village life in *Tuyûr Ailûl* ("Birds of September"). In this novel we read: "If you happen to fall into the embrace of life in a small village you will forever remain bound to every fibre of it." And it is this first novel of Emily's that not only founded her fame but also gives us the basic clues to her attitude towards place.

The place is there: A village inhabited by old people who have long resigned themselves to their kind of life, and by young people full of expectations and hopes for a good life, a better life than the one their elders lived, a life full of excitement and love. Yet, the idea of a better life within the limits of the place is soon thwarted for many. The place remains unyielding – beautiful but immovable: a good place for those who can enjoy what it offers; an acceptable place for those who don't dare think further; an unbearable place for those who are frightened by the idea of an unfulfilled life – but even they will never completely sever the links that tie them to that place.

But the place, haughtily imperturbable, first the object of childhood dreams and then the object of nostalgia in later years, – this place begins losing its people. Many leave, driven by need or desire, attracted by visions and illusions of a possible better life somewhere else. Emigration begins.

And this is Emily's major topic, her deep concern. To stay or not to stay, to leave or not to leave – that becomes the central question, permeating all her novels in different variations.

The place, the village, *Jûrat as-sindiyân* remains forever the warm nest or the memory of it, the realm of bliss, the reason for the *bukâ' al-atlâl* (weeping over the remnants). But the place is brutal. Once you leave it, it must be, it will be for good. There is no coming back. Returning to the village, Muna in *Tuyûr Ailûl* finds herself in front of closed doors and unfriendly, unwelcoming faces, and Radwan in *al-Iqlâ' 'aks az-zaman* ("Flight against Time"), who left the village to seek relief from a raging war, is abducted, tortured and finally murdered after he returns to what he thought was his land.

For sure, some people come back for well-defined, yet very limited reasons: they may want to see the old folks “back home” – as they may say. They may even show off with their achievements abroad. But the so-called home is no longer home. The place is no longer theirs. They may not speak the language properly any more, and they look and behave differently from the people they had left behind - betrayed, some would say. So, in order to keep the contact with the place they may take a girl from the village as a wife for a brother, a cousin, an uncle, themselves.

But then, the place may be disturbed after all. The time-honored haughty and steadfast immobility may be shaken – and from an unexpected direction. People who do return may have a deep, almost revolutionary impact, overthrowing age-old traditions and habits and giving hope that things may indeed change, freeing people from out-of-date customs, waking them up and opening new paths of life for them.

Sounds subversive? It is. Hidden in one of Emily Nasrallah’s short story collections there is a story describing exactly such an upheaval. And I shall take the liberty of presenting to you, in conclusion of my brief remarks, this story that describes the potential dynamic change in the village – a change, mind you, prompted from the outside.

The story was published in 1981, while the war was raging in Lebanon, and it expresses this hope that the place, the village, *Jûrat as-sindiyân* may continue, may evolve. The story is called *Nasamat ṣaif* ("Summer Breeze"). It is a beautiful story, not too long and written in Emily Nasrallah’s typical soft and mellow style, about a girl of maybe fifteen years, who spends her summer vacation in the house of her relatives in the village. No one remembers having seen her before. She passes her time looking out of her window, strolling through the fields or even riding on horseback. But she upsets the village, being different in innocent little things she does and shows – her dress, her makeup, her hair, even her fingernails are different from what the old women or the young girls in the village are used to. Thus,

- Neighbors become very interested, even excessively curious about what she does, how she behaves, what clothes she puts on, what lipstick she uses.

- The boys of the village start hanging around the house she lives in, hoping to catch a glance of her or, better still, to be noticed by her.

- And her first words directed at the adolescent boys (there are no girls in the street) are about playing the flute, singing traditional old folksongs and dancing, and they ignite an explosion.

Even though she does not live in the village, she knows the old songs and sings them with fervor, she knows the traditional dances and performs them with enthusiasm. A long, wild dancing night ensues with the boys of the village singing and dancing with her and around her.

For a short while the girl merges with the whole village population that reluctantly joins the feast, and the village youth develop an enthusiasm, a vitality and *joie de vivre* which they never had before. But the nocturnal party does not pass without consequences, and the impact is profound. After the young girl leaves the village, returning to her unknown home somewhere abroad, nothing in the place remains as it had been before. The village has woken up from its eternal sleep and slumber, shedding some of its age-old habits. It has received the kiss of Sleeping Beauty, not from the

handsome prince who had to fight through the thorn-bushes but from a young girl who came from abroad but had roots in the village and was familiar with its traditions, a young girl that could reach out to the villagers with traditions of their own. A revolution was fomented, a revolution of the mind – and one without violence! What a vision!

Some decades earlier, another Lebanese author, Mikha'îl Nuaima, later highly appreciative of Emily Nasrallah's first novel as I mentioned already, in an article entitled *Fal-nutarjim* ("Let us translate") called on the Arab literary world to translate the great works of international literature, i.e. to import new ideas, genres, models, topics, to let themselves be influence by things foreign in order to stimulate and develop their own world.

The "Summer Breeze" shows exactly that: the transformation of a society through revitalization from the outside.

A dream of preservation and change at the same time. I think it was one of Emily's dreams.

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