The Palestinian Exile as Writer

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I.

Way back in 1952 I wrote about the Wandering Palestinian having replaced the Wandering Jew. A historical horror, which over the centuries had acquired the force of a myth, seemed after 1948 to come alive again. It was ironical that the new wanderers should be driven into the wilderness by the old wanderers themselves. Each time, in those days, I travelled from my anchorage in Bethlehem out into the world's capitals, looking for a living, the sense of the world's wilderness intensified further. If anyone used the word "refugee" with me, I was furious. I was not seeking refuge. None of my Palestinian co-wanderers were seeking refuge. We were offering whatever talent or knowledge we had, in return for a living, for survival. We were knowledge peddlers pausing at one more stop on our seemingly endless way. When in the autumn of 1948 the customs men asked me upon arrival in Baghdad to open my luggage for inspection I offered them a battered suitcase full of books and papers, a small box full of paints and brushes, and half a dozen paintings on plywood. I was not a refugee, and I was proud as hell.

In those days my mother, my brothers and I had found a couple of small rooms on top of an old ramshackle house in Bethlehem — but with a magnificent view of the Valley of the Shepherds. We had to leave our house in Jerusalem for the invaders, the morning after they had blown up the Semiramis Hotel — almost next door to us — in the small hours of a

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cold stormy night, killing so many people, some of whom I personally knew, including one of my dearest friends. Innocently, we thought we were leaving our house for a mere two or three weeks. It is amazing what five or ten miles can do to your sense of distance, when your home has been occupied and you cannot return to it. In Bethlehem, I felt as though I was ten thousand miles away from the city which I could see across the valley. The Zionist guns trained in our direction were not a mere physical barrier: they were a lethal reminder that our city, for us, was to be now no more than a memory, a dream, that we were now back to zero. Enjoy the view, if you can, in the midst of the homeless thousands. But you've been plucked out by the roots. Your books, your ideas, your visions: they're absurd indicators to a world where the absurd rules supreme. Hang on to your faith and enjoy them, if you can, when you don't know where your next loaf of bread will come from.

On the very day the Israeli state was declared I knew that the dislodged population was to be deliberately called "refugees," that the horrific political and human issue would be so twisted that the maximum response it might elicit from a then weary world would be some act of charity, if at all. The Second World War refugees were still filling transit camps in Europe, in the process of their being "settled" outside their home countries, and we would be lumped together with them, at worst another demographic case for the United Nations, thus adding no further burden to a world conscience already fully burdened. Universal sympathy had already been blunted in a manner that suited the new Joshuas pulling down the walls of Jericho, if not by their raucous horns, then by the planned destruction of a nation soon to be hailed by hack novelists and propagandists in America and Europe as a heroic "return." From holocaust to holocaust. In a twentieth century world full of newspaper correspondents, films, radio broadcasts and what have you, we might have been the inhabitants of a Jericho of immemorial times. You crush the unarmed inhabitants somehow, you terrorize them by bullet and gelignite, you throw two dozen corpses of their murdered men, women and children into a well, and you drive them out: they'll send their S.O.S. to their neighbouring cousins (the ancient Amorites and Jebusites must have done the same thing, with similar results) and their cousins, already more subtly terrorized, will dispatch a few bedraggled soldiers and volunteers simply to prove that nothing could really be done. Tell the victims now: "You're refugees, don't make a nuisance of yourselves: we'll do something about it. Refugee aid after a few months will trickle in: you'll be numbered and housed in tattered tents and tin shacks. And try and forget, please. Hang on to your rocks wherever you are, and try to forget."

But then a society is not just a collection of men and women surviving together anywhere. A man belongs to some undefinable order of complex relationships which, once disrupted, takes a long time in reforming, though perhaps along a new pattern. And many of the men and women who, like me, were thus torn away from their original "pattern" seemed to be catapulted into space: they would finally land somewhere, no doubt, battered but not necessarily destroyed. Bashed in, but not always and not quite completely wrecked. There is an essence that is not so easy to destroy, however impaired, it seems. Forgetting, however, was just not possible. And refugee status was a thing they rejected. It was unthinkable. Clinging hard to their reason, they had begun to traverse the cosmic absurd. Thus began the Thirty Years (so far) of Palestinian exile.

Bethlehem was the scene of my childhood until I was twelve – a scene I have always remembered with special love and written much about since. But going back to it from Jerusalem at gun-point in 1948 was not exactly going back to one's grass roots. I went to it from a shambles: a temporary resting place with the qualities of a nightmare. It was one huge chaos of people fleeing from nearby towns and villages, all in a horrible daze. The place was simply not viable. One could not fight, could not work, could not make a living of any kind. People demanded to fight, but no arms were forthcoming from anywhere. They talked, cried, gathered and dispersed in a way that made no sense. And yet when our money had run out, with what painful reluctance I left it in search of a living.

But leaving it was another kind of horror. Going down to Transjordan, I was one of several thousand young people with some education looking for a mainstay of some sort for themselves and their families. Transjordan was another country then, and a passport official near the Allenby Bridge of those days demanded a bribe before he would stamp my passport. I refused to comply: I simply did not have the money. In Amman, I needed a Lebanese visa in order to be able to go to Damascus or Beirut – I had thought I might get a teaching job at the American University of Beirut if I managed to get to Lebanon. But the Lebanese Consulate was not accommodating. One was not allowed to go beyond a petty clerk's desk to put in an application for a visa: he simply said, "No visa. We have enough people like you in Beirut." By luck I met in the street one of my old Transjordanian students, now an influential young businessman. By sheer resourcefulness he got me a certain kind of merchant's document which seemed to persuade some official in the Foreign Office to issue a letter in my favour requesting the Lebanese Consulate that I be granted a visa. So I obtained the visa. And off I went to Beirut, and stayed with a Palestinian friend, Ali Kamal, who was teaching medicine at the AUB. I could see he

was not well: he was struggling hard against a nervous breakdown, because he had lost his home and could not tolerate his work.

The American University there, it transpired, was not exactly waiting for my arrival. I was received very kindly by the Vice-President, who regarded my academic credentials with genuine interest but said, "Alas! Too late for the present academic year, and too early for the next. We'll have your name on our files." A week later I had to go to Damascus, but before leaving Beirut I was warned, if I wanted finally to return to Palestine (i.e., what was left of it), I had to get a transit visa for Transjordan, which had no consulate in Damascus. So off I went to the Transjordan Consulate in Beirut.

A young man intercepted me in the lobby on the way to the consul's office: "No visa," he said. Hell, I said. Let me try. A clerk at the office looked at my passport. "Palestinian? No visa," he said. But how am I to return home — since my way to it is only through Transjordan, and Lebanon will grant me no work and no residence permit? "It's none of my concern," he said. "Don't make a nuisance of yourself." Out I went, and the young man in the lobby said, "You see? No visa. But" — and he put his lips to my ear — "if you give me three Palestinian pounds (about 30 Lebanese pounds then), I'll get it for you in a second." Go to hell, I said.

I hurried back to my friend who was waiting for me at the offices of a then well-known newspaper, and told him. The editor heard the story, and pulled out a sheet of paper. He wrote me a letter of introduction to the consul, who fortunately was one of his close friends. "Take it to him personally," he said, "and I'll give him a phone call in the meantime." And that did the trick. When I got my transit visa, the clerk in the consul's office gave me a dirty look. The man in the lobby was not much kinder.

My fortnight in Damascus, bleak and hopeless at first, suddenly ended in a decisive, almost fateful way. There was no job to be had for me in Syria, although some of my colleagues and companions, who had beaten me to it, seemed luckier. The city was beautiful: I remembered how two summers earlier I had stayed as a tourist at the Orient Palace, its best hotel then, in comparative luxury. Nothing of the sort now, of course. One felt unwanted, redundant, and rather silly trying to sell one's own academic credentials in a saturated market. Palestinian teachers were everywhere, including the older ones who had been my own teachers. It was in Damascus that I heard on the radio that Count Bernadotte had been assassinated by Zionist terrorists. On the following morning I accompanied a friend to the Iraqi Embassy, where a cultural attaché was interviewing applicants for teaching jobs in Iraq. For some weeks I had

resisted the idea of going to Baghdad for work: it seemed so far away from Jerusalem. I had said I wouldn't go to Baghdad even if its streets were paved with gold.

The cultural attaché was kind. Though not much over thirty, with his bald head and large bright eyes, and a Peterson pipe which he kept smoking, he looked very academic. For a moment he would not consider my request: he said he was that morning announcing the results of the applications that had been put in many days earlier, and it looked as if he had enough of them to meet his requirements. But another look at me, and at the Cambridge certificate I shyly unrolled before his eyes, changed his mind at once. "Where have you been all this time? " he said with delightful surprise. "Here! " And right away he filled in a form. I was being offered a one-year contract, renewable, to teach at the so-called higher institutions of Baghdad — which meant teaching at a college. The man, I knew later, was no other than Dr. Abdul-Aziz Duri, a famed Iraqi historian who was a year later to be the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, where I had become a member of the staff, and some ten or twelve years later the first President of the new Baghdad University.

I was given an Iraqi visa on the spot. The very same day I travelled back to Amman — my transit visa was in order — and the following morning I was in a rickety old car, together with four other passengers, climbing up the ever-twisting, ever-eroded, ever-potholed road back to Palestine, to Bethlehem. I had to collect a few things. Two or three days later I was going down the same road again. And off, across the desert, to Baghdad. For just nine months, I said to my brothers. How was I to know that the nine month interlude was to extend into a lifetime?

When Balzac first went to Paris, he said he wanted love and fame. When I went to Baghdad, I could hardly expect love or fame: I went as an exile into an unknown, untried terrain. I stayed in the cheapest hotels, fed in the cheapest restaurants. The first few weeks (my college was slow in getting started) were long and grim: like every exile before me, I loafed about, wrote endless letters to others and endless poems for myself. I read Frazer and Schopenhauer, sitting on a shaky balcony over noisy Rashid Street, thinking of home, of the streets of Jerusalem. What had this strange, dusty city to offer me?

I wanted to work, to write, to talk. And, oddly enough, that was exactly what the city soon offered me. Some time later, on Baghdad radio, I gave broadcasts in English on Palestine which were probably only heard by the monitors at the British Embassy. My best piece, I seem to remember, was a poem entitled "Palestine Refugee Blues," which I wrote as a "sequel" to W.H. Auden's "Jewish Refugee Blues." I was given quarters at the college where I taught. And I loved the students, all

hand-picked scholars being prepared to be sent to universities abroad. I met some of the most delightful "angry" and "desperate" young poets and artists of the city; in fact, I was surrounded by them almost day and night, in tea-shops and in my college quarters – much to the annoyance of the Acting Dean, a diehard stick-in-the-mud, who told me that if I was not careful I would be turning my room into a den of rebels who, for all he knew, might be wanted by the police. In the college, I started a debating society, a music society, and on festive occasions I danced the dabkeh with the students. A year later I started a dramatic group and a studio for amateur painters for them. What wonderful material for a new era, I thought. I preached change, unashamedly. We had been cheated and betrayed by a thousand years of decay, I said. We had been the victims of our beautiful inane rhetoric. We lost Palestine, because we had confronted a ruthless modern force with an outmoded tradition. Everything had to change. And change had to begin at the base, with a change of vision. A new way of looking at things. A new way of saying things. A new way of approaching and portraying man and the world.

At college, that first year, one half of the staff were Palestinians – Zuhdi Jarallah, Mahmoud al-Hout, Fahd Rimawi and myself – and the other half British, among whom was an eager young man just down from Oxford, Desmond Stewart. He was soon to be one of us: a great talker bursting with ideas, soon also to acquire the reputation of a brilliant writer.

There were quite a few Palestinian professors, all newcomers like me, in the other colleges. Some were first-class mathematicians from Cambridge, others were engineers, economists, historians. In our various fields we all tacitly insisted on one thing: a high standard of teaching. We often changed syllabuses in pursuit of more challenging courses for the students. Our teacher-student relationship was mostly rather unorthodox, it was so close and inter-communicative, which did not always earn the admiration of officialdom. The thing did not last very long: in three or four years we had dispersed again.

But in three or four years I was amazed how much, in spite of everything, I had actually done – lecturing, teaching, writing, painting, travelling, going through a maze of intense relationships. I remembered Balzac again. Baghdad was certainly not Paris. But the famed age-old city, once ravaged by centuries of neglect and now going through the agonies and thrills of a strange rebirth, could still offer its own gifts of love and fame – for all their worth to a man who remained, to all intents and purposes, a restless exile.

In August 1952, I married an Iraqi girl and a month later we were on a ship sailing to the United States. I went to Harvard on a research

fellowship. Less than two years later I was back in Baghdad.

II.

The sense of loss in an exile is unlike any other sense of loss. It is a sense of having lost a part of an inner self, a part of an inner essence. An exile feels incomplete even though everything he could want physically were at his fingertips. He is obsessed by the thought that only a return home could do away with such a feeling, end the loss, reintegrate the inner self. Back at home in a few years I had seen a kind of a new Arab society taking shape – especially in Jerusalem, the absence of which, or my forced separation from which, filled me with that painful sense. Members of my generation had given that society a certain colour, a certain significance and cohesion, which we discovered after its disruption to have been different, almost unique, Arabwise. Some of it in later years nearly reshaped, in a strange hybrid way, in Beirut, the city which witnessed the gathering of the largest number of talented and enterprising Palestinians. But even in Beirut it was a society in exile, however brilliant its members. Doomed, unless somehow saved. It would contribute to the local scene in a hundred ways, but always on sufferance. It was not a mere question of alienation, a grouping made up of a lot of uprooted individuals: the malaise was deeply collective and deeply personal at once. One was uprooted as a person, and uprooted as a group, and both seemed to float away by a mysterious impulsion. Palestinians as individuals had become wanderers. You found them in their wanderings in Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, along the shores of the Arabian Gulf, in England, in the United States, in India, anywhere you could think of. In a few years the dispersal was completely global.

They grouped, splintered off, regrouped and splintered off again. A sense of looking for the lost part of the inner self haunted them, impelled them to keep moving. And each Palestinian was an exile after his own fashion, even within the Arab world. Tawfiq Sayigh, who tried exile in the United States, England and Lebanon, had a famous dictum: "Worse than exile abroad is exile within one's own homeland" – meaning by homeland the Arab world. The dominant theme of his poetry was, in fact, exile. (He died as an exile at Berkeley, California, and was buried there in a vast cemetery, with a Chinaman on his right, a Japanese on his left: a stranger to the end.)

Within the universal tragedy of dispossession, dislodgment and massacre engulfing a whole people, everyone of us had, of course, his own personal sorrows in the violent loss of friends and relatives. In the midst of the upheaval of May 1948, the death of a dear friend in Jerusalem from a

Jewish shell symbolized for me at least one aspect of the complex tragedy. Albert Atallah was a young man whose love had embraced the world: he was a member of the Arts Club committee (of which I was president) and always saw that the lectures and concerts given by the Club were attended by Jews as well as Arabs. A shell split him open and entangled him with his own bowels. Such shocks came in rapid succession. One kept picking up bits of news about one's friends: killed, scattered, lost.

In Baghdad I wrote letters in every direction, trying to keep track of the people I knew, not always successfully. In 1951 I at last saw an old Jerusalem friend I had not seen for four years, since the declaration of the Partition Plan: Theo Canaan. He was indeed establishing himself as a leading architect in Beirut, just as I thought I was establishing myself as a university professor in Baghdad. Neither of us, however, could really deceive ouselves: I stayed with him in an old house he had beautifully remodelled in Ain Mraiseh, very close to the sea, but we only talked about Jerusalem. Our friends, we said, were being tossed about like flotsam on a violent sea: we could envisage their faces as they were hurled away from one another, hurled back for an instant to one another, then dashed away into the invisible – the final dispersal where no sea could bring them back together again, except in imagination. Theo thought he was creating Jerusalem-inspired architecture in Lebanon; his neighbour, Elie Beitjaly, another Palestinian, was writing little gem-like stories in the form of parables about the human condition, while I was writing short stories about the Jerusalem of the days of innocence. All of us were, through art, reliving our original Palestinian experience. Every articulate Palestinian was doing this in one way or another: it was the wanderer's attempt to hang on to his vision, to keep the inner essence intact.

In time, the sense of belonging to Palestinian soil, rather than diminishing, was intensified in the exiles. The Israelis had made a grim miscalculation when they thought that the refugees, who were mostly at the time illiterate or semi-literate villagers, would boggle up their own issue into one of mere survival at any cost. Palestinian intellectuals were suddenly everywhere: writing, teaching, talking, doing things, influencing a whole Arab society in most unexpected ways. They were coping with their sense of loss, turning their exile into a force, creating thereby a mystique of being Palestinian. One had to be blind not to see that the whole thing would sooner or later develop in the direction of violent action. Even in their exile the Palestinians became motivators: and whenever attempts were made to strike them down, their motivating power seemed to acquire even greater momentum.

In the mid-1950's I remember talking about the Faust syndrome in Palestinian intellectuals. I wrote a poem entitled "Soliloquy of a Modern

Faust": the Palestinian as thinker, as collector of books and ideas, as organizer of experience and observation now making his compact with Mephistopheles in return for action. He will go through the cities of the world "like the night, like the storm," possess Helen and dally with Margaret, ever on the move, driven by a "godly lust, a giant's appetite," finally to demand an apocalypse, an involvement in a cataclysmic act: the world might end "with a whimper," but exile could only end "with a bang."

The Palestinian wanderers, as I said, went everywhere. I, for one, found my way in a few years to several countries besides Iraq: France, the United States, England. Whereas a large number of my friends stuck it out in these countries, many of them distinguishing themselves in their professions there, I insisted on coming back to the Arab world. If exile it had to be, I thought, let it then be, for me, exile in a world which, after my Iraqi experience, I felt to be a world of tomorrow. The "land of opportunity" in the fifties I took to be the Arab world, where the 19th century American idea of "pushing the frontiers west" seemed now to apply most: the terrain, in spite of all the apparent instability, seemed to offer the prospect of a people vigorously pushing their intellectual, economic and social frontiers toward a kind of health and power which, however long it might take, would bring about the regeneration of the nation. And the Palestinians, though often molested, maligned, imprisoned, deported, were always in the vanguard with the pioneers.

Right from the start Palestinians had declared that their fate and the fate of the Arab nation were interlocked, were in fact one. Palestinians could not fail, except by the failure of the whole Arab nation. But they also knew that so much depended on themselves: on their efficacy as a leavening force for a meaningful future for Arabs everywhere.

In 1957 in Baghdad I met Arnold Toynbee, who was then on a tour of the Arab countries. As a great thinker who saw civilization as a recurrence of historical patterns, he seemed to have a very high opinion of the role of the Palestinians (many of whom he had met personally on his travels) in Arab society. He said that wherever he went he found Palestinians in leading positions; they were the unacknowledged pace-setters of the Arab world. He likened their expulsion from their country to the expulsion by the Turks of the Greek thinkers and artists from Byzantium in 1453; these thinkers then spread throughout Europe and were a major factor in ending the European dark ages and bringing about the Renaissance. The Palestinians, he told me, were having the same seminal influence on the Arab world. It was their fate to be the germinators of a new age, the heralds of a new civilization. Then he added another parallel: more than once in the past, Palestine had released into the world a force of radical change,

notably when the Apostles of Christ went out, unwanted in their own land, to create abroad in the form of Christianity one of the greatest changes in human history. Crucifixion was of course to be expected: but St. Peter's Church was later erected on the spot where the barefoot Apostle had been crucified upside down. Neither Jesus nor his twelve disciples could possibly have been Jews: they actually belonged to the indigenous Palestinian racial groups on whom Israel and Judah had for centuries imposed their own exclusive society, itself always subject to foreign powers.

It was a comfort of sorts, I suppose, to think in such historical terms, but the sense of exile was not any the less acute. Most of the creative work of my generation would have to be seen in this light. It was a mixture of nostalgia and anticipation – a mixture of past and future, with very little present to speak of. For Palestinians, the creation of a modern national literature, in fact, took place in exile in the first decade of Palestinian dispersal, in this agony of time past and time to come. Until 1948, intellectually, we were rather like an appendage of Egypt. We had two or three good poets and four or five good prose writers who, nevertheless, would never have found their way into an anthology of Arabic writing then. But by 1960, the literary scene had completely changed. In the sixties, Palestinian poets at home under Israeli occupation, having absorbed the influence of the exile writers, erupted upon the scene with voices of fire. By 1970, Palestinian poetry and fiction had given Arabic writing everywhere a colouring, a force, a style, distinctively their own.

For me, until 1967, exile from Jerusalem was the central fact of my life, however much I participated in the literary and artistic activity of Baghdad – and, indeed, of Beirut. My short stories (the last of which I wrote in 1956) were basically about my pre-1948 experience in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The novels I wrote after that date, it appears to me now, were an expression of the anxiety of banishment: I was grappling with the endless theme of a Palestinian exile in an Arab world which he loved and observed, worried about and wanted to change. Like Wadi' Assaf in my novel "Al-Safina," the Palestinian sailed away only to ache more deeply for his return, to ache more bitterly for his grass roots. In the meantime he was enraged to see the Arab world blundering on in agony – groping for a way out of its wilderness, and getting lost again. Not only in a political, but more so in a psychological sense. Salvation was hard. And so slow in forthcoming.

June 1967, for some months, seemed to have put the lid on for me. Even my occasional pauses in Bethlehem, hitherto possible as an invigorating ritual, became impossible. The essence, so dearly guarded until then,

seemed to have been hit. I had to make sure that it was nursed back to health. But Palestinians, in twenty years, though exiles, though dispersed throughout the world, had gone through their baptism of fire and had been regenerated: however seemingly fragmented, they had become a nation. And, like any nation, they had to be reckoned with – perhaps for the first time since the beginning of their struggle against Zionism half a century earlier. Disaster at last had done its worst. Its only effect now, paradoxically, could be to break the dam and release the pent-up flood that had been rising for twenty years. All of which is another story.

The Palestinian may still be an exile and a wanderer, but his voice is raised in anger, not in lamentation. More tragedies have befallen him, more vicious attempts are made to contain him, but his sense of nationhood, so unshakable, is backed up now by a capacity for action more resourceful and more versatile than ever. The wilderness has brought forth fruit? Certainly, but very little of it is smooth to touch or sweet to taste. It will continue to be so until the exile finds, or forces, his way back to his soil.