BRILL

JOURNAL OF WORLD LITERATURE 2 (2017) 394–407

JOURNAL OF WORLD LITERATURE

brill.com/jwl

Between Solidarity and Pleasure

An Interview on World Literature with Elias Khoury

*Anne-Marie McManus**
Washington University in St. Louis
amcmanus@wustl.edu

Abstract

Elias Khoury, a leading voice within contemporary Arabic literature and criticism, talks about the worldliness of Arabic literature, both as a writer and as a critical voice whose longstanding political engagement offers much-needed perspective on the possibilities and limitations of world literary debates today.

Keywords

Arabic literature – circulation – world literature – exoticism – freedom

Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury is a leading voice within contemporary Arabic literature and criticism; a widely respected public intellectual in the Arabic press and politics; and an acclaimed author whose novels have been translated into English and French. His most prominent novels include *Bāb al-Shams* (*Gate of the Sun*, 1998), *Riḥlat Ghāndī al-ṣaghīr* (*The Journey of Little Ghandi*, 1989), *al-Wujūh al-bayḍā'* (*White Masks*, 1981), and *Yālū* (*Yalo*, 2002), and his writings and cultural work have received regional and European prizes. Most recently, in 2016 he won the Mahmoud Darwish Award for Creativity, donating his winnings to Birzeit University, and at the time of writing, his latest novel, *Awlād al-Ghītū—Ismī Ādam* (*Children of the Ghetto—My Name is Adam*, 2016), has been long-listed for the prestigious IPAF ("Arabic Booker"). In translation, Khoury won the inaugural French *Prix du roman arabe* in 2008 for

* I would like to thank Georges Khalil for arranging the interview and the Europe in the Middle East program of Berlin's Forum Transregionale Studien for hosting the conversation.

© KONINKLIJKE BRILL NV, LEIDEN, 2017 | DOI: 10.1163/24056480-00203006
Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

Comme si elle dormait (*Ka'annahā Nā'imah*), translated by Rania Samara. He has also been recognized as a global ambassador of Arabic culture, winning the UNESCO-Sharjah prize for the promotion of Arabic culture in the world in 2012.

As such, Khoury is uniquely situated to address the worldliness of Arabic literature, both as a writer whose works have entered the networks of contemporary world literature and as a critical voice whose longstanding political engagement, notably with the Palestinian cause and the more recent Syrian uprising, offers much-needed perspective on the possibilities and limitations of world literary debates today.

In a conversation that took place in December 2016 in Berlin, Khoury described his distinctive vision of the ties linking Arabic literature and other literatures of the world. Khoury departs from the field's predominant focus on contemporary circuits of translation and exchange, arguing instead for an historically layered account of Arabic literature's worldliness. What emerges is the template for myriad literary readings and creative engagements that can link 10th-century Abbasid narrative to 20th-century Latin America, and that connect Arabic literatures to those of China, India, and the postcolonial Global South. Khoury's comments introduce, moreover, differing scales of worldliness for literature, distinguishing regional circuits (i.e., between North Africa and the Levant) from broader global ones. As Khoury's remarks make clear, linguistic difference and new reading publics come into play as texts travel from Lebanon to Morocco—a circulational process aided today by the rise of regional prizes and digital media. How might world literary studies account for such varying registers of circulation beyond the nation? For Khoury, in any case, what cuts across so many rich literary networks is a concept frequently marginalized in literary study and teaching: the fundamental tie between narrative and pleasure, whether understood as the social experience of listening to a tale told in the night, the reader's creative interpretation of a novel, or as the author's ability to speak without constraint.

This last concept of pleasure introduces the political dimensions of Khoury's account of world literature, read from within the modern Arabic literary tradition, which both echoes and expands on recent critiques of world literature by scholars like Emily Apter and Pheng Cheah. Khoury's articulation of an historically grounded world literature launches a critique of political causes today, which he characterizes as being untethered from their original context and interpreted as a universal struggle for emancipation. Stripped of their local contexts, political issues come to circulate like commodities and fall prey to the threat of exoticism. Perhaps most importantly, this fragmented and decontextualized treatment of politics undermines the possibility of international

Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

solidarity—one that Khoury insists is more necessary than ever today. Refusing to force literature into an instrumental or pedagogical role, Khoury's concept of world literature traces a nuanced and multifaceted account of creativity and commitment: one in which literature remains the necessary haven for articulated individual and collective experiences of freedom.

The transcript of our conversation, edited for clarity, follows.

•••

Anne-Marie McManus: *You oversaw a series of world literature texts that were translated in Arabic in the 1980s. I'm wondering if you could start by talking about that experience.*

Elias Khoury: The idea of this series was to translate Third World literatures into Arabic. We began to introduce African, Asian, Indian, Japanese, then Latin American [texts] into modern Arabic literature. It was with this series, called *The Memory of the Peoples*, that the boom of translation of these literatures into Arabic began. I was the editor for about 45 books, and wrote all the introductions. We worked with translators who could translate [directly] from Spanish, for example, not from English or French. It was a lot of work for me and a lot of joy.

I was interested in comparative literature, which I [later] became a professor of. And normally in comparative literature we compare Arabic to French and English, which is meaningless—not meaningless, but it's not the real issue that we in the Arab world should be concerned about. So, we wanted to work on the literatures of cultures—let's say emerging literatures—that were very near to our recent experiences in the Arab world. In this sense, it was very interesting and innovative. It led me to work a lot on comparing Palestinian and South African literatures, as well as Arabic and Turkish. Until that moment, these kinds of comparison had unfortunately not been done, whether in Arabic literature or in other Third World literatures. I remember the first time I met a Turkish author who now lives in France, and he told me that he'd read about me in *Le Monde*. And I said yes, while I need to read about you in *The Guardian*. And this is a shame. So to build this bridge was very important. And I think the bridge was built. It was also a sign that the new literatures of the world are not coming from Europe anymore, but mainly from these other countries.

AM: *Did you see this series as a continuation of the Third Worldism that characterized Bandung and the 1960s moment*?

Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

EK: You could relate it to Bandung, but in our consciousness it was not Bandung, which took place when I was young. For me, it was a feeling of going back to our heritage. First of all, even though we in the Arab world were under Ottoman rule for 400 years, we don't know Turkish literature, which is a shame. And we don't know Farsi literature or Indian literatures. But if you go back to our classical heritage, *The 1001 Nights* was the book of the ancient world. And the ancient world was the Arab world, India, China, and Greece. So you can find traces of all these cultures as part of our Arabic culture. The idea [of the series] began there, and then it developed towards reading African literatures. For me, it was a great personal experience when we translated Achebe and Soyinka and others, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, into Arabic. And then we opened [the series] to Latin American literatures: Cortázar, Fuentes, Márquez, Borges, and so on. You can discover how these literatures are related to each other. Especially with Latin American literature, we discovered how much it was a kind of continuation of the *1001 Nights* from Borges on. This isn't just about what was then called magical realism. I think these guys knew *1001 Nights* (Borges wrote a lot about it) and knew this tradition very well, and in a way they were continuing it. This discovery was very important for us.

And it didn't mean that we stopped reading English, French or German [literatures]. On the contrary, the concept of world literature was coined by a German, as everybody knows, and an understanding of the new literary forms would have to pass through the French and English experiences. But the idea was to arrive to a point where we could feel free to read whatever we want, whatever appeals to us; and not only to read, but to communicate deeply with these kinds of literatures.

AM: *Your first articulation of this series initially sounded like a postcolonial project, but the layers of historical experience and textual reading you're describing suggest a more historically deep understanding of world literature—one that isn't limited to the moment of decolonization.*

EK: You're right; in a way it's a postcolonial project, but not only that. It's also about digging into the layers of these cultures to understand our literary heritage. Actually not just to understand—to enjoy. We read to enjoy! But we forget that. Most professors teach everything in ways that make [reading] a burden. Actually we need to enjoy! The whole idea of literature is to enjoy. As you know, the Abbasid Arabic writer Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi has a book called *Kitāb al-Imtāʿ wa al-Muʾānasa* [*The Book of Enjoyment and Bonhomie*]. To enjoy and to communicate, this is literature.

Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

Then afterwards, yes, reading a novel can help you understand more about a society. And sometimes novels allow this. As Marx used to put it, you have to read Balzac to understand French society because he was better than any sociologist. But I think this is a side effect of literature. The main effect of literature is to go deep into the human soul, into the human experience, and to give you this profound knowledge of our human condition. And knowledge is pleasure, right? The greatest pleasure is the pleasure of knowledge.

AM: *Does what you're describing have echoes of the sociability we find in the classical sense of* al-adab?

EK: If you go back to the Arabic tradition, in the *maqāmāt* [maqamas] or *The 1001 Nights* and other types of storytelling, you'll find that storytelling was supposed to happen at night because that's where you find all the shadows of life. The concept of night was different then, by the way; we destroyed night with electricity. Night was when the souls came out, when you could speak to the dead, when the *jinn* would appear, when all the secrets of life would appear. So, first of all, [stories] were told at night. Second, storytelling was a pleasure. And third, it was a trap. Scheherazade told stories to survive; in the maqamas, [characters like Abu Fath al-Iskandari] told [their] stories to beg and to charm their audiences. So there are many layers to the meaning of telling stories and dealing with literature. But they all come together when you arrive at this idea of pleasure.

AM: *The critic Abdelfattah Kilito has commented on the forms and genres of classical Arabic literature that entered world literature:* The 1001 Nights, *which was not canonized as high literature in Arabic, met a European predilection for exotic and long-form narrative, while the* maqamas *did not. As a result, the* maqamas *didn't become a "worldly" representative of Arabic literature—and* The 1001 Nights *did. Would you agree with that characterization?*

EK: Of course. I'd add that the problem with the *maqamat* is not only that they didn't appeal to European taste in the 18th century like the *Nights* did. They also don't appeal to us! We cannot read the *maqamat*. The heaviness of language is one of many, major differences between the *maqamat* and *The 1001 Nights*. The language of *The 1001 Nights* is fluid; it's like water: a combination of spoken and classical, a very simple combination of prose and poetry. Whereas a *maqama* is a kind of dictionary; it was a place for the writer to show how much he knew the language. So, knowing language became a goal in itself.

Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

But language should [only] be a goal in the sense that it reveals; it is not a veil. In the *maqamat*, language is a veil. In *The 1001 Nights*, language is an unveiling that reveals life. This is a big difference. And this is why I think *The 1001 Nights* entered world literature, not only because the stories appealed to European taste. Of course they did, and it's clear how the Europeans read them and used them. We spoke about the impact of the *Nights* on Latin American literature, but their impact on European literature has also been enormous.

AM: *As a writer, you also combine* fuṣḥā [*Modern Standard Arabic*] *and spoken or vernacular Arabic in your literature. Is this to achieve a similar lightness of language?*

EK: Yes. I also combine poetry and prose in my novels. First of all, on the issue of language: we inherited a very rich language. And it's not only that *fuṣḥā* is rich. Arabic is a rich language because it has at least four structured colloquial "families": I mean Shāmī [Levantine], Iraqi-Khalījī [Gulfi], Egyptian-Sudanese, and North African. Within each of these four big families, there are smaller families, which give us writers a huge possibility of playing with words, of picking a word from here and placing it there, and so on. This gives us layers of meaning that you can't imagine.

The colloquial was always present in Arabic. The model that some Arab intellectuals and many Orientalists have tried to push is not true: this idea that the Arabic language is sacred and that its destiny will be like Latin's. First of all, the Arabic language was never sacred, never. From the beginning of *ʿaṣr al-tadwīn* [the age of codification or recording] in the eighth century, Arab critics were very clear about that. Bin Jaafar will tell you "*al-sh'ir ghayr al-dīn*"—poetry has nothing to do with religion—so, we separate them.

I think the great intelligence of Abbasid Arab critics was that they made a linguistic reference for the Qur'an from pre-Islamic poetry. So the Qur'an has a reference in language which is totally vernacular, which is totally non-sacred. The Qur'an is not the origin of Arabic; you have to go to pre-Islamic poetry and its language to understand the Qur'an. This is why the Arabic language is unlike another sacred language, Hebrew, which had died until it was revived with modern Zionism and the European model of the nation-state. But until now they curse in Arabic! Can you imagine a language without curse words? Anyway, this is the first myth [about Arabic] that's not true.

The second myth is that Arabic is like Latin. But in Arabic, what we call *fusha* has always lived alongside spoken Arabic, and since pre-Islamic times many levels of the same language [have co-existed]. And so, to use these levels in our

Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

contemporary literature is first of all a revolt against a concept that was forged in *ʿaṣr al-nahḍa* [the 19th and early 20th century Arabic renaissance]: the call to go back to the "golden" language of al-Mutanabbi and to reject the language of *The 1001 Nights*, which was considered to be full of spoken language. [The Abbasid critic] al-Jahiz is full of spoken Arabic; very few people know that. We can treat the colloquial as one level of Arabic, which lets us play with different levels of the language. In my novels, I don't only use colloquial in dialogue. I actually use the syntax of the colloquial in the structure of my language, which helps to change its meaning. We writers are supposed to do many things, but one of them is to innovate in language and to make language more adequate to our lives, to our ways of speaking.

AM: *It sounds as though these particular intersections between the registers of language—between the everyday and classical heritage—could be what make a text mobile in a worldly sense. I find this interesting because the opposite is often believed to be the case: that these kinds of linguistic innovations are too local, too particular, and therefore not translatable into world literature.*

EK: It's exactly the opposite. Some people tell me that because I'm using Lebanese (or Lebano-Syrian, Lebano-Palestinian) colloquial in my novels, people in North Africa will not understand my work. But this is not true. First of all, they understand. Second, when you read any novel in any language—when I read in English—there are things I don't understand, which is normal! But we understand them with the flow of the novel. Scholars, of course, have to understand every word to write a paper or literary criticism. But still, literary language flows; it works, and people understand. In my experience, people understand my novels all across the Arab world. I don't have any problem, which means that it works. I'm not the only one using colloquial in my work; many other writers do too. And now we are adapting to the Moroccan colloquial, which we can understand. It's of course a little bit different, more difficult—but it works also! So there is no problem with language, which is part of the history of Arabic literature.

On the other hand, to write only in spoken language or dialect like Said ʿAql, the Lebanese poet who tried to push for the idea of a Lebanese language, [is different]. He pushed this idea to the extreme and wanted Arabic to be written in Latin letters. But then you discover that he actually had to *invent* a language because in each city [in Lebanon] they speak in a different way. So he would have had to create a *fuṣḥā* from the dialects (*ʿāmiyyāt*) to make a Lebanese language! And it will be what? It will be Arabic.

Downloaded from Brill.com 11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

AM: *It's interesting to me that you frame this in terms of the ties that stretch across the Arab world as a region—for example, Moroccans reading Lebanese literature. I'm wondering what possibilities you see if any in the recent flourishing of prizes in the Gulf that are designed to foster these regional ties in terms of readership and material support.*

EK: I think, first of all, to tell you the truth, that it's bizarre that the pan-Arab literary prizes are in the Gulf. Actually, the cultural capitals of the Arab world are not there, and cultural production is not there. The cultural capitals of the Arab world are Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, and Casablanca. Look at how many novels are published a year in Cairo and Beirut. Of course, Damascus now is in rubble, but it's only been that way for five years. So, [the shift to the Gulf] is astonishing. I think it's part of a new domination that came with the last phase of the Cold War, when the Americans worked in coordination with the Saudis and Gulf countries to make the Islamist project emerge. This project had effects on America itself in 9/11, which was a disaster. But the real disaster is in the Arab world. So with the disaster, the cities of the Gulf are filling a small gap. But this is only something temporary; it will not last. The fact that [those prizes] are there, it's not bad, but it's not where we should be directing our attention.

AM: *Recently you wrote an article on Adonis and the Nobel Prize, in which you said: "the worldliness of the Nobel prize comes from the strength of Eurocentrism; for a writer to become worldly, he must be translated into English, Spanish, and French; but if he's translated into Chinese, Turkish, or Farsi, that won't help him in gaining the title of a worldly writer."*

EK: Yes, I wrote this article on the case of Adonis and the Nobel, and I argued that, first, Adonis should take the prize so that we can all be finished with this problem that every year we Arabs fail in the Nobel Prize—enough already. And then the second idea was that we have to be more serious. We give the Nobel a lot of respect, and the fact that it provides a lot of money for whoever wins it is excellent for all writers. But we mustn't forget that this is a prize mainly for European languages. Just read the list of winning names. Latin American literature can fit because it's in Spanish, and South African literature can fit because it's in English. The two South African writers who have won the Nobel write in English, not Afrikaans or in local languages. And from time to time, they give it to a Chinese, Turkish, or Arab writer—they gave it once to Naguib Mahfouz. This is to give the impression that the Nobel is an international prize. So my idea was, let us just understand this prize in its real context. Every time

Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

an Arab writer doesn't win the Nobel, there is a lamenting in the Arab world—this is meaningless! We have Mahfouz, that's enough. What's the point?

Now, to go back to the passage you mentioned, it's true. We are now living under an empire. I said English, French and Spanish, but actually English is the language of this empire. We're speaking it right now! And when I come to Berlin, I don't need to speak one word of German to live here normally because English is the language of empire. The languages of empire have always been present in the history of cultures. In the Roman Empire, there was Latin and Greek. In the Arab world under the Abbasids, there was Arabic and Syriac. And, actually, all the translations of Greek philosophy came from Syriac, not from Greek. So although there was bilingualism, the language of empire was dominant. Today, we're living under a new empire. Hopefully it will not last long because the Americans are mad enough to elect Trump as their president. But a writer has to be translated into the language of empire, otherwise he is not part of the empire. Meanwhile, great cultures like the Chinese, Indian, Arabic traditions, which have huge literary heritages, must not put themselves in a position of waiting. They have their own novels, and if they want to make their own prizes, they should. I wonder why they don't, although this is another story about politics and structures.

But in the last analysis, literary prizes are quite meaningless. They are good, and they help a little—but they are not the things writers and critics should expend their energy on. Lately, I was discussing with a friend who asked me about the Nobel Prize. I told him the greatest prize I ever won was in 2013 near Jerusalem, when a group of Palestinian youngsters—350 people—settled on a piece of land that was going to be confiscated by the Israelis to build a colony. So they settled on it, and they built a village. They called it *Bāb al-Shams* [Gate of the Sun], like my novel. For me, this is the real prize. Normally, novels imitate reality; here, reality was imitating a novel. For a writer, this is the best award he can have from his readers. Other prizes are OK, and if they come, why not? I'm not against them. We don't have to wait for them though—we have to be more serious and engaged.

AM: *It seems the question of political causes, which doesn't often enter the current debates on world literature, is very relevant here. What is the worldliness of the Palestinian cause or the Syrian uprising, for example?*

EK: The way world literature is structured is very complicated, and it is a new issue in our neoliberal age. During the Cold War, the dominant discourse was that literature had to be apolitical. This was a kind of accusation made against writers like Pablo Neruda, Nazim Hikmet, Yannis Ritsos—the list is very long.

Downloaded from Brill.com 11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

They were accused of making propaganda, not literature, because they were part of the struggle of their peoples for revolution, for democracy, for freedom and so forth. And this experience showed us that being apolitical in literature then meant that you were not supposed to be a leftist.

And now, in the post-Cold War neoliberal era, the relevance of political issues to literature has been totally undermined—totally—unless the literature is “exotic”. For example, I feel pity for a great writer whom I love very much, Salman Rushdie, because he was pushed by this stupid, terrible fatwa of Khomeini into the hands of his enemies. Totally into the hands of his enemies. Today, the idea of dealing with political issues, with the struggles of peoples, is not *à la mode*. To be exotic is *à la mode*. There are some topics in fashion: to criticize Islam, to support feminism and so on. I criticize Islam all the time, and I support the rights of women, but these are not the only issues. They are part of bigger issues, which are the liberation of our peoples from colonial domination, from despotism, from occupation, from Zionism, and so on. Separate issues are important, but they must be understood in this larger frame. If they are separated from the frame of emancipation, first, they become banal. Second, they open the window for new fascist discourses, which we are now seeing in America and parts of Europe. This is because people have forgotten that when we struggle for a woman’s right to abortion, it’s not because we like it or we are just feminists. We do it because [the right to abortion] is necessary to liberate women and to liberate society. It’s part of this idea of the liberation of society. When the idea of the liberation of society disappears, these issues lose their meaning. And the moment they lose their meaning, because they’ve lost their relation to a major idea, they will become marginalized, and then fascism will enter with its old discourse.

When I was a young student in the 1960s, nobody could have imagined that the world would develop towards this language: towards the language of Trump, Marine Le Pen, Fillon, Putin, Netanyahu, and Bennett. Nobody could have imagined that anyone would dare to say things like that. Of course, all this is not only a cultural issue. It’s a very complex problem with political and economic paradigms, and so on. But on the cultural level on which we work, I believe that under the new liberal ideology and postmodern flow of ideas, issues were separated from their origins as *tools* of liberation, as *part* of liberation—and as a result they lost their meaning. And this made it easier for fascist discourses to come and occupy the scene.

AM: *Recent critiques of world literature scholarship, like those of Emily Apter and Pheng Cheah, resonate with what you’re describing. This line of argument suggests that because world literature is so focused on networks, commodities, and*

Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

flows—without articulating a substantive critique of capitalism—it risks simply retracing the paths and logic of commodity circulation.

EK: Literature is not an important part of these commodity flows. The important part is art, performance art, installations.

AM: *Why these forms particularly?*

EK: Because here you have a real structure of circulation. For example, a post-modern artist can make a piece that will play for two days in Beirut and then travel from one museum to another. The artist will make a lot of money, but will have zero impact. Zero! Theatre was made to be a part of a city, part of a social structure. You cannot have culture floating in the air, just like that. It must be part of [something larger]. As for world culture, which does exist, it must be related to struggles in different places in the world. The problem of world literature, world culture, and so on, comes down to what is international. Today, there is no more international solidarity. The idea of international solidarity is over. What is international now is consumption. So if you want to enter this world field, you must enter the field of consumption. The only alternative is to rebuild the idea of international solidarity. We are seeing how it has collapsed: just look at Syria. The Syrian people are experiencing the greatest tragedy of the world since World War II; everybody says this, by the way, but everyone is just looking, as if there were nothing happening. 10 million refugees, 10 million refugees! What more do they want?

AM: *Do you see this collapse of solidarity as due to a lack of imagination or a lack of volition?*

EK: I think both. I think this is the big shock [of the post-Cold War era]. It was astonishing because we didn't realize it was happening. When the Berlin Wall fell, we were happy because we thought that now the time for real socialism would come and that the fall of the Soviet Empire and dictatorship would open the way for a new idea of social justice. But the opposite happened, and the ideas of socialism and social justice in our own societies are in danger. Look at Trump, who wants to get rid of Obamacare; even though when you compare it to the care available in France or Germany, it is ridiculously inadequate! And Trump wants to destroy even that because the state is not responsible for the welfare of society. When you arrive at this idea, then everything is in danger. I'm really frightened; I mean the signs are very black. And now we are speaking in the ways people used to speak when Nazism and fascism began their ascent.

Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

People back then were astonished to see the outcome. And I think that we are on the way to a similar outcome.

AM: *Your argument that certain causes, ideals, or issues have become disconnected from their original contexts, which is the context of a liberation struggle, and can as a result circulate freely around the world made me think of the way "solidarity" functions on social media, or the way social movements in the US were inspired by a decontextualized idea of the Arab Spring, for example. In this context, what is the role of literature that circulates? Is it to re-establish those deeper connections, in some imaginative sense?*

EK: No, no, the work of literature can never be that. Literature cannot establish anything. Literature can shake things, ideas, and behaviors. But structures? That is another story. Otherwise we are demanding of literature things that it cannot do. Literature cannot change societies. Literature changes literature. And when you change literature, you change ideas, which will of course have an effect too. But writing literature is not like writing a pamphlet. I write novels, but I also write pamphlets and articles that are very politically engaged. And writing an engaged article is something totally different from writing a novel. When you write a novel, you are shaking the language we use in our daily life, and you are presenting new perspectives and so on. You are shaking the way we live, which of course will have an effect. But it is not the job of the novelist to analyze. Our job, the main issue for writers today, is to be critical—very critical—and to be free. Literature must defend the idea of freedom as something total: that is, the freedom of women as part of the freedom of the working class, as part of the freedom of the oppressed peoples—otherwise it will not work.

AM: *So how does the pleasure we discussed earlier relate to this idea of total freedom that we can encounter in literature?*

EK: Where is pleasure? You know, the biggest pleasure in intellectual life and work is to speak the truth without being afraid of the consequences. I think this is the biggest pleasure. I think that the moment Socrates drank poison was an expression of life.

AM: *And the reader also experiences freedom through literature?*

EK: I think that readers are the real writers. For example, you might come to me and tell me: I read a novel, and I liked it. I'll say to you: great, tell me about it. And

Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

then you'll write the book; you'll invent a novel for me! Of course, what you'll say is based on a novel. In the same way, when we write novels, they are based on other novels, on experiences. In this way, the reader is the ultimate writer. This is why I think the reader can be very important, and at some moments even more so than the writer.

AM: *Lastly, if you could edit a series on a world literature of Arabic today, what would you do?*

EK: We don't need a series like the *Memory of the Peoples* today. Now there are translations in Arabic, even if they are not systematic. I would suggest that the publishing houses of Arabic literature take better care of this issue. But a series now? We don't need to repeat the past. We have translators from Turkish, from Farsi. But the big publishing houses in Beirut and Cairo and North Africa (Casablanca) should be more systematic and take this task more seriously.

What we need now is a series of literary criticism: translations of literary criticism from India, from Latin America, and from Africa. Maybe I would do this, if I had the chance to continue this kind of work (although I don't have time). I think that now is the time to translate and work on introducing literary criticism. Because today all our students go to America, England, France and Germany, so they know very little about how the literary movements in places like South Africa or India are developing. This is why there is a big need to translate literary criticism from such places.

Works Cited

Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. New York: Verso, 2013.

Cheah, Pheng. *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2016.

Khoury, Elias. *Awlād al-Ghītū Ismī Ādam*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawziʿ, 2016.

Khoury, Elias. *Bāb al-shams*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1998.

Khoury, Elias. *Comme si elle dormait*, trans. Rania Samara. Paris: Actes Sud, 2007.

Khoury, Elias. *Gate of the Sun*, trans. Humphrey Davies. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Archipelago Books, 2005.

Khoury, Elias. *Riḥlat Ghāndī al-ṣaghīr*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 1989.

Khoury, Elias. *al-Wujūh al-bayḍāʾ*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Rushd lil-Ṭibaʿah wa-al-Nashr, 1981.

Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access

Khoury, Elias. *Yālū*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2002.
Kilito, Abdelfattah, "Les Arabes et le livre." In *La langue d'adam et autre essais*. Casablanca: Toubkal, 1995.

Downloaded from Brill.com11/09/2020 11:18:56AM
via free access