

The Illusion of Return

by Samir El-Youssef, Halban, 2007, 154 pp.

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An airport is that most modern and liminal of places, a kind of temporary and illusory ground between the worlds of home and elsewhere, a no-place through which we pass, noting the lives occurring around us and sharing in their dislocations, yet absorbed in our own. As such, it provides an apt central metaphor for Samir El-Youssef’s *The Illusion of Return*, a novel which turns on the brief reunion, after the passage of seventeen years, of two Palestinian friends. Ali is in transit, flying from America, where he had fled after a time as an Israeli collaborator; he is now on a journey of return (and possibly expiation) back to Lebanon. The novel’s narrator is also a Lebanese expatriate, though for vaguer reasons, and is currently a resident of London where ‘[s]ince as far back as I remember, everything I have done or tried to do has been half finished. In recent years I have had a half relationship with a woman, no more than part-time jobs, and I have abandoned my PhD.’ He agrees, though with misgivings, to interrupt the undistinguished and vague circumstances of his life – his job, where he lives in London, and even his name remain unknown to the reader – and meet with Ali during his stopover at Heathrow.

Any such encounter after the span of years is fraught with memories and questions, and the weight of remembered ghosts hang heavy between the two men as they re-examine a night years past, the last when they and their two friends, George and Maher, were together. Where once there were four, now there are two: and how this came about, and the long consequences of that night, unwind through the novel in a carefully managed structure, divided into ‘Prologue from the Present,’ ‘Past,’ and ‘Epilogue,’ with the ‘Past’ further broken into four sections, each dealing with the fate of a character and each beginning with the same repeated motif.

This structure is, perhaps, too carefully managed; the novel has a bit of a constrained, over-controlled air in consequence. More of a concern is that El-Youssef tells his story in such a dry, exacting style that it’s sometimes difficult to engage with either character or action. The reader is held at arm’s length by this utilitarian language, which gives the novel at times the sense of a witness statement or page from a police dossier. Such factual recounting in the service of narrative is not in itself necessarily a problem, but El-Youssef is particularly miserly with adjective or simile,

and the result tends to the monotone and an overall feeling of reading a slightly stiff translation. With the writing denuded of colour, he substitutes a continuo of speculation and analysis, an interior monologue which tracks with compulsive precision the possible motivations behind events or the emotional twists and turns of a conversation. The book is loaded with passages like the following:

When I thought of it this way, I could not help feeling embarrassed. It was the first time that I had considered my family and people like my family as middle class, or at least labeled them as such. To be honest I had expected to be more surprised than embarrassed, but I was not surprised. The directness of such a description, I said to myself, did away with the expected surprise. It acknowledged the shame and was vulgar enough to make my sense of embarrassment greater. Then, I thought, we must have all been deeply aware of the fact that the relative prosperity we enjoyed was the outcome of moving from the refugee camp to the city, and then merging into the local middle class. We must have regarded such prosperity as somehow a betrayal of our origins, and we probably felt guilty about that.

This enervation of style means that the book functions as more philosophical exercise than novel, recalling stories in a similar tradition – the reunion after the fact of survivors of trauma – where conversation and debate take precedence over subtleties of character (an example similar in feeling to *The Illusion of Return* is Chaim Grade's short story in Yiddish, 'My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner,' which describes a chance meeting of two Holocaust survivors and old friends on the New York subway; another literary touchstone is certainly V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival: A Novel in Five Sections*, and not just for its obvious titular precedent but in its look at the experience of cultural dislocation in England.) But El-Youssef is capable of writing with flair, and the story is at its most compelling when he ventures into satire, where his voice is at its strongest. His cleverly rendered description of Maher as a young Marxist full of the fervour of recent conversion, who disastrously attempts to spark revolution amongst the workers at the town's lone factory, is a welcome high point; the prose becomes swift and bracing as it meets its material head-on. The tragic story of Amina, the narrator's sister, also benefits from being told with an understated economy. El-Youssef seems most comfortable when needling the follies of village life and exploring its social constrictions, and he handles its ironies and contradictions, its humour and repression, with an informed and sensitive eye. He also makes an explicit effort to avoid the pitfalls of didacticism – the narrator recalls defacing a poster at his English university:

O'KEEFE | El-Youssef's Illusions of Return

Below [the slogan 'No Return No Peace'] was the name of the organization 'The Campaign for the Right to Return.' I realized that here was my opportunity to remind them what I thought of their campaign. Pretending to look at it with great interest, I waited until no one was around, and quickly crossed out the words 'the Right of Return' and wrote just above it in capital letters the word WANKERS. And after a moment of hesitation I added an exclamation mark.

This small gesture of refusal is a rare instance of assertion from a character who mostly communicates a purposeful lack of emotion. 'The world of the past,' he tells us, is a place that 'had increasingly been appearing unreal to me and where people as much as politics were merely parts of a chaotic dream.' Undoing that dream requires the minute analysis of the past he has been trying to avoid, and what tension El-Youssef creates is that of an urgency in getting at facts – what happened and how – and parsing out what meaning might be found there. Even though the narrator admits that the truth is a slippery thing, and that nobody shares the same history even if they were present at the same events, he still is compelled to try and pin down the actualities of his life in Lebanon, and the effect on his friends and family: to make the 'past real.' This means that for him things are examined rather than felt, and he makes known his lack of feeling with typical bluntness: 'On the rare occasions when I forced myself to be fully attentive [in conversation], I felt as if I had been locked up in a room which had no door or window or any kind of exit at all.' The passing shades of memory are more 'real' than his own rather empty perception, and it is the characters around the narrator, particularly George, Maher, and Amina, who are the most fully realised; even Ali remains rather faceless, a collection of prompts and reminders, until the revelation of his meeting with a fellow survivor of war which provides the impetus for his journey back to Lebanon. However, writerly intention can be at least partly assumed here. Within the book is a hint that this lack of affect is a result of the experience of violence, and that the narrator's inability to believe in the reality of his past is a symptom of suffering beyond words. Violence, says Ali, 'makes everybody and every event look like it has only one dimension. Like in an action movie, people seem flat.' When Ali first proposes their meeting, the narrator experiences a flash of inspiration, and sits down to outline what he hopes might be 'an essay or even a small book.' This outline, possibly intended to be the book we are at this moment reading, sets out the narrator's core problem: 'By virtue of [Ali's] life, which couldn't be summarised or related in the form of a linear narrative, Ali manages to enable the past world to acquire some of the characteristics of the real world and to reappear as such.'

The narrator then abandons his project in an up rush of anxiety. He can no longer pretend that ‘the past is unreal,’ but his difficulty in seeing the figures of his past as actual people also becomes at times the novel’s difficulty, as well.

Such juggling with the tricky surfaces of history and the fallible material of memory raises various philosophical specters, including a repetitive (and rather sly) invocation of Heidegger, who is constantly quoted – and likely misunderstood – by George. El-Youssef appears deeply interested in exploring the disconnect between ideology and reality; every character in the novel is stunted by political circumstance, a victim of power masking as truth. The Lebanon of the early 1980s which El-Youssef portrays is a place of profound instability, where families can only hope for safety within a constantly shifting ground of power. Lives rest on arbitrary questions of loyalty and betrayal is an ever-present shadow; survival is a matter of constant appeasement. Simply staying out of trouble and under the radar is a feat of will in the face of multiple forces struggling for power: the ‘Israelis and their collaborators from the local militias, on the one hand; or, on the other hand, the Resistance and those who pretended they were from the Resistance.’ In such a world, citizenship is a fantasy and security a passing dream, just as much as the desire to reset the clock and change history. As El-Youssef is aware, the country of the past is one which has closed its borders, and to which none of us can return.

The visit with Ali over, the narrator rides the Tube back to his blank slate of a city, contemplating the singular and one-way nature of the larger journey we all share, his obsession with completion rendered in the end as another, final illusion. The novel’s close constitutes a bit of a self-conscious (even meta-literary) ending which though easily anticipated is not unsatisfying, but what remains most clearly are not worked over questions of time and history but singular moments: the panicked fight of a man from an Israeli roadblock; a young woman standing on the street dressed in combat fatigues, the cigarette in her hand and AK-47 over her shoulder emblems of her defiance of family and tradition; the narrator hiding in an alley after curfew as an Israeli patrol passes nearby, while George, in a gesture of either daring or indifference – it’s never made clear – stands out on the street.

El Youssef perhaps shares his narrator’s desire to explain by recounting, and to deflate political abstractions through the stories of individuals who must live under and suffer from them. *The Illusion of Return* is his first novel in English, but he has previously published *Gaza Blues*, a collaborative work with Israeli writer Etgar Keret, which had the explicit agenda of making literary bridges. Another clue can

O'KEEFE | El-Youssef's Illusions of Return

be found on the openDemocracy website where on October 17, 2005, El-Youssef posted a response to an article by Omar Barghouti. [1] Barghouti's article had called for support of a cultural boycott of Israel, and opened with strong criticism of British writer Linda Grant. El-Youssef wrote in her defence:

Linda Grant has – in ways shared by a small number of us, Palestinians and Israelis alike – tried to expand understanding and awareness of Israel and Palestine by introducing personal experiences usually excluded from oversimplified daily news coverage of and commentary on events. Barghouti dismisses such attempts as merely 'clichéd personal stories.'

The Illusion of Return is dedicated to Grant, and it is not too far a stretch to see the novel as a demonstration of this ideal, expanding understanding and providing human nuance missing from 'oversimplified daily news coverage.' El-Youssef knows that within the political lies the hapless personal, and that it is in the telling of such stories of personal experience that we can create genuine human contact. In this *The Illusion of Return* is a welcome beginning.

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References

El-Youssef, Samir (2005) 'Against boycott and its rhetoric: A Reply to Omar Barghouti.'
http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-debate_97/against_2934.jsp

Notes

[1] El-Youssef 2005.