



“Exiled from the meaning of exile”: The poetics of displacement in Sa’dī Yūsuf’s poetry

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ABSTRACT

Sa’dī Yūsuf has long been acknowledged as Iraq’s foremost living poet and one of the progenitors of “the exilic poem” in modern Arabic literature. The article discusses the poetics of exile in Yūsuf’s poetry from the 1960s to the present day. Applying the theoretical framework developed by Claudio Guillén, it demonstrates how Yusuf’s exilic writings reveal a gradual shift from a “narrative of exile,” which

is underpinned by a distinct elegiac mode, to a “narrative of counter-exile,” which is characterized by a tendency toward integration, increasingly broad vistas or universalism.

Between a home that immures me and a wide sky,

how will I choose my home?

Between my silence and my song,

how will I choose my whisper?

(Sa’dī Yūsuf, “A Poem”)

The interchangeability of home and exile, here and there, memory and forgetting, points to the fact that all concepts of origin and belonging—whether real or invented—that one venerates are mere fictions that one can construct as well as deconstruct.

(Mustapha Hamil, “Exile and its Discontents”)

The exiles

will wake up one morning

only to find that they are exiled

even from the meaning of exile.

(Sa’dī Yūsuf, “One Morning”)

Exile and literary creativity: Some general comments

The experience of exile has been an essential generative force for artists and writers throughout the twentieth century and arguably long before. Whether the exile is forced or voluntary, the convergence of expatriation with the experience of creativity has been an ongoing force in artistic and literary vanguardism. Exiled artists and writers throughout history have refigured and reimagined both esthetic and geographic boundaries, and their work has often been radical, shaping changes beyond the esthetic or formal. In this sense, by relocating themselves to different cultures, exiles inevitably give birth to more universal ideas, the result of the integration of the local mind with the universal cognitive map. Poets and writers, displaced by force or choice, have produced the type of work that shatters boundaries, perhaps mirroring the ruptures evident in their changed geographies, allowing them what Julia Kristeva has called “exquisite distance.” Kristeva’s account of the foreigner’s “perverse pleasure” in self-alienation profoundly contributes to an understanding of exilic creativity. Her concept of the “foreigner” and the experience of being a “stranger” shows how these experiences might overlap and intersect. She writes:

Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of being an other ... this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself. Rimbaud’s *Je est un autre* [“I am an other”] was not only the acknowledgement of the psychotic ghost that haunts poetry. The word foreshadowed the exile, the possibility or necessity to be foreign and to live in a foreign country, thus heralding the art of living of a modern era, the cosmopolitanism of those who have been flayed. Being alienated from myself, as painful as that may be, provides me with that exquisite distance within which perverse pleasure begins, as well as the possibility of my imagining and thinking, the impetus of my culture (Kristeva, 1991:13–14).

In his study, Michael Seidel maintains that “so many writers, whatever their personal or political traumas, have gained imaginative sustenance from exile [...] that experiences native to the life of the exile seem almost activated in the life of the artist: separation as desire, perspective as witness, alienation as new beginning,” and concludes that “the imagination not only compensates for exilic loss but registers that loss as aesthetic gain” (1986:x). Separation from family and history therefore involve an interesting thematic ambivalence. The prime consequence of losing social institutions is to remove external definitions of the self, but its secondary effect can be the creation or discovery of a new personality.

The experience of displacement produces a unique artistic personality, one between two different topographies: home and exile. This duality has an incredible effect on the expatriate and provides a way to a global consciousness that

incorporates both home and exile. In the end, as critic Abdel Malek Sayad (1996:10) maintains, he or she will never be the same as when forced into exile. Polish-American poet Czesław Miłosz indicates that exile is not “just a physical phenomenon of crossing of borders,” as for those who are involved in any exile the question becomes the search for truth (1993:25). The loss of homeland in its geographical meaning creates the emergence of a new homeland. Although the reverse may happen in some cases, the intellectual enrichment and cognitive alienation put the poet in a better position to understand the homeland’s realities in a wider context. In two different places, while tackling the issue of exile and creativity, writer and critic Salman Rushdie insightfully notes that:

the word “translation” comes, etymologically, from the Latin for “bearing across.” Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation. I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained (1991:17).

Migration [...] offers us one of the richest metaphors of our age. The very word metaphor, with its roots in the Greek word for “bearing across,” describes a sort of migration, the migration of ideas into images. Migrants—borne-across-human—are metaphorical beings in their very essence (1991:278).

The experience of exile thus offers profound insights into not only marginality in its many forms, but *creativity* itself. There is, as Irit Rogoff observes, an important link between the lived art, the experience of being creative and the desire to refigure geography, the sense of temporality and the boundaries of the self:

While the art world cannot claim for itself a fixed and concrete location, a mapped terrain with distinct boundaries, it is nevertheless a world unto itself, with a distinct cultural and linguistic tradition and a vehement sense of territoriality. ... Any critical examination of the relationship between geographical materialities and the representation of coherent identities reveals that, contrary to expectations, these neither complement nor construct one another in a direct or causal manner. The mere appearance of ... recognized national entities within identifiable boundary lines ... or the representation of specific linguistic practices, do not necessarily signify a set of shared homogeneous values operating from within one shared collective identity. ... [T]he disruption of such traditions through geographical and cultural exile and dislocation opens up possibilities for the

incorporation of alternative and plural perspectival vantage points and pictorial references which forge new cultural conjunctions (1997:159–160).

Sa'dī Yūsuf: A short biography

Sa'dī Yūsuf has long been acknowledged as Iraq's foremost living poet and one of the progenitors of "the exilic poem" in modern Arabic literature. One cannot fail to observe the astuteness of his insights as well as the poetic power in his mapping of the stages of an exile's transformation in and adaptation to exile. Although many Arab poets and writers have been exiled or have chosen expatriation or emigration, no other poet has so deeply engaged with exile as a subject and explored so obsessively the role of dispersion and fragmentation in his poetic works.

Yūsuf was born in 1934 in Hamdān, a small village in the district of Abū al-Khasīb, south of Basra. He published his earliest poetry in Baghdadi newspapers when he was still in high school, though at this stage he did not yet consider poetry writing as a career. The change occurred only when he graduated from high school and enrolled in the renowned Higher Teachers' Training Institute (*Dār al-Mu'allimin al-Āliya*) in Baghdad, where he received his B.A. in Arabic with a teacher's certificate. In the early 1950s, Yūsuf, following in the footsteps of the most highly acclaimed Iraqi poets, joined the Iraqi Communist Party (founded in 1934, the year he was born), which gathered under its wing all the intellectuals who overtly displayed their social sympathies. Yūsuf's first experience with exile took place in 1957, after an unauthorized journey to a Communist youth festival in Moscow. In the face of the threat of imprisonment by the monarchic regime, he was forced to roam between Cairo and Damascus and finally settled in Kuwait, where he worked as a schoolteacher. He returned to Iraq only in 1958, the year General 'Abd al-Karīm Qāsim overthrew the king, assumed total power and formed a left-wing government. Qāsim's regime, which was supported by the majority of Communists in Iraq, lasted approximately five years, during which Yūsuf and other leftist intellectuals were able to express their Marxist views publicly in nearly complete freedom.

The fall of Qāsim's regime in February 1963 was a significant turning point in Yūsuf's life. The new nationalist regime of 'Abd al-Salām Ārif conducted a sweeping political purge, in which thousands of Communists were tortured, executed and massacred. Yūsuf himself was incarcerated for short periods of time in prisons in Basra, Nuqrat Salmān (near Samawa on the Saudi–Iraqi border) and Ba'qūba. In 1964, he was released only to be tried again, this time to face a death sentence. He miraculously managed to leave Iraq and decided to settle in the recently independent Algeria and then, for a short while, in Libya. Algeria's newborn socialist regime provided Yūsuf with a relatively tolerant environment in which he could express his views freely.

Yūsuf returned to Iraq in 1972, after a new Baathist regime had assumed power and legalized the Iraqi Communist Party. He was appointed director of the Iraqi Ministry of Culture and editor of the literary and folkloric review, *Al-Turāth al-Sha‘bī*, positions which he held until 1979, when this very last Iraqi “phase” in Yūsuf’s life came to an end. A few weeks after Saddam Hussein took absolute political power, Yūsuf—like most prominent Iraqi intellectuals, teachers, writers and poets—realized that he must abscond from his homeland and return to a life in exile.

Yūsuf decided to settle in Beirut, which at the end of the 1970s was still an important literary center of the Arab world. He wrote for several Palestinian journals that were published in the Lebanese capital. In 1981 and 1982, he was editor-in-chief of the literary journal, *Al-Mawqif al-Adabī*. Following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June 1982, Yūsuf joined the PLO forces. He insisted on staying put and becoming an active participant fighting the Israeli army during the long siege on Beirut. After the Palestinian forces and other Arab volunteer fighters were driven out of Lebanon at the end of the siege, Yūsuf managed to escape Beirut under an assumed name and embarked on a ship headed for Tartous, Syria.

After a short stay in Syria, Yūsuf settled in Yemen, which at the time was the only Marxist country in the Arab world. In Aden—a city which he hoped would prove to be a true haven—Yūsuf worked as a cultural consultant, founded a publishing house (*Dār al-Hamadhānī lil-Nashr*) and published both the country’s first children’s magazine and its first weekly magazine. The ghastly civil war between south and north Yemen that broke out in January 1986 found Yūsuf hiding together with other refugees in a school that became a target of insurgent artillery. He miraculously survived the massacre that occurred later on and managed to flee the country. Between 1986 and 1990, Yūsuf was frequently forced to move from one country to another. He worked as a reporter in Nicosia, in Belgrade and finally in Tunis, where he settled during the first Gulf War. Yūsuf testifies that, even when he resided in a comparatively liberal Arab country, he felt constantly threatened, a feeling which ultimately drove him to immigrate to Paris. Yūsuf’s radically anti-establishment personality, his fierce independence of mind and his willingness, at all costs, to swim upstream against the powerful currents of politics, led to yet another inevitable clash, this time with the French authorities.

Yūsuf now wandered between Moscow, Cairo, Leningrad, Cyprus, Addis Ababa and Amman, where, in 1986, he received the ‘*Arār price* of the Union of Jordanian Writers. He ultimately resided for several years in Damascus, where he was editor-in-chief of several literary journals, most notably *Majallat al-Madā al-Adabiyya* and *Majallat al-Hadaf al-Siyāsiyya*. However, in 1997, Yūsuf realized that in order to achieve absolute artistic freedom, he must reside in a non-Arab country. He chose London, where he was recognized as a political refugee.

Theoretical framework

In his seminal essay, "The writer in exile or the literature of exile and counter-exile," literary critic Claudio Guillén distinguishes between two types of narratives of exile. In the first, "exile becomes its own subject matter," and it often belongs to the elegiac mode. This kind of writing reveals a tendency towards "a direct expression of sorrow" and is usually submerged by the hardships of displacement. In the second, "exile is the condition but not the visible cause of an imaginative response often characterized by a tendency toward integration, increasingly broad vistas or universalism" (Guillén, 1976:272). He calls the latter kind a literature of "counter-exile," in which authors "incorporate the separation from place, class, language, or native community, insofar as they triumph over the separation and thus offer wide dimensions of meanings and transcend the earlier attachment to place or native origin" (Guillén, 1976:272). In this kind of narrative, the writer tries to put the expulsion into perspective in a balanced and meaningful way and attempts to overcome—but *not* forget—the tragedy of exile. The literature of exile is linked to "modern feelings of nationalism," whereas in the literature of counter-exile "no great writer can remain a merely local mind, unwilling to question the relevance of the particular place from which he writes" (Guillén, 1976:275,280). Indeed, in the latter kind of narrative, exile is almost stripped of its "tragic edge" and becomes an elixir of freedom from the suffocating grip of national identity.

I contend that, whereas Yūsuf's exilic writings until 1982 clearly belong to the first kind of narrative, those dating after his departure from Yemen belong, by and large, to the second. Yūsuf's later exilic writings do not address exile itself, but rather exemplify a type of narrative written in exile. His poems evince the exilic sensibility even though the poet by and large shuns the *clear and direct* thematization of exile. The theme of exile thus becomes an undercurrent in the later poetry of Yūsuf and only occasionally surfaces in an expansive singular image. In an existentialist mode, Yūsuf iterates the poet's quest for self-identity within a vastly changing cultural configuration. Past and present historical moments interweave, unveiling persistent themes of displacement, cultural syncretism and the search for identity. Thus, the poetics that Yūsuf actuates seek to supersede and transcend the rhetoric of binary oppositions that have traditionally evaluated exile in opposition to the homeland. Thus, visions of the homeland as a fecund, nurturing mother, as the site for resolution of a fragmented exilic subjectivity into the full self, are repeatedly deconstructed, and what one finds in Yūsuf's later verse is a persistent preoccupation with the themes of borders crossing over and the adaptation to new cultural contexts. As a whole, Yūsuf's poems are sensitive and penetrating notations of his changing attitudes toward displacement, of the complexities and ironies of exilic existence, poems that persistently negotiate the dialectical push and pull of a lost homeland, a negotiation that often evokes nostalgia and continued attachment to the homeland but also a willingness to open up to the uncharted possibilities of the

new surroundings. A poet who reached his poetic maturity as an exile, Yūsuf expresses in his poems a subtle interior exploration of himself in the context of the exilic condition. Exile has become for Yūsuf the crucible in which he is able to examine questions of deracination, cultural dislocation, homesickness for an elusive home, the search for a new sense of identity, the pain of loss or dispossession and, ultimately, the reconfiguration of his identity and reintegration.

1964–1972: Early poetry of exile

In his early exile poems, Yūsuf gives evidence of the sort of poetic imagination—"nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal"—which Edward Said and others have identified as characteristic of the exile (Said, 1994:366). Perched precariously between his memory of his homeland and an uncharted destination, Yūsuf dexterously charges the notions of alienation and dissociation with subtle and multi-faceted connotations that are interrelated and interdependent. Mythology, history, world literature and the visual arts all provide impetus for his poetry (and also play a crucial role in his exilic self-fashioning), as does the physical world itself in both its human and non-human aspects. From a temporal point of view, Yūsuf writes two types of exile poetry: instantaneous chronicles, an interiorized history of what he has most recently seen and experienced; and retrospective poetry, with the perspective of years. In each type, however, the thematics of home, homeland, refuge and "knowing one's place" play a central role. Like almost all narratives of exile, Yūsuf's are, perhaps by necessity, essentially autobiographical: the experience of exile is, in this stage, so overwhelming that writing about it becomes the only way to resist the void created by the state of displacement. The literary critic Trinh Minh-ha maintains that Third World writers "are condemned to write only autobiographical works" (1994:10), and, in the case of Yūsuf's early exilic narratives, the predominant theme is indeed almost exclusively the poet's fragmented, displaced self. Through poems underpinned by associative memory, Yūsuf's early exilic narrative foregrounds the fragmentation and sense of discontinuity experienced by the immigrant in his daily life as it uncovers the varied facets of exile and the role of memory in easing the pain and turning the trauma of exilic loss into esthetic gain.

"An intimate relation exists between exile and the role of memory in constructing an exilic identity," asserts Philip Schlesinger (2004:46), and, indeed, memory plays a decisive and crucial role in Yūsuf's early poetics of exile. Many of his early exile poems can be seen as instances of the pressure of memory on poetic imagination under the influence of extraordinary psychic intensity. In his poem *Kalimāt Shibh Khāssa* ("Quasi-Private Words"), which he dedicates to his close contemporary, the exiled Iraqi poet and intellectual, 'Abd al-Majīd al-Rādī, Yūsuf says (1995:Vol. 1, 331):

قد يقع الإنسان
في قبضة السجان، أو في قبضة الأزهار
...
لكنني أريد أن أخبرك الليلة
وأنت لا تجهلني-
كنا معا في ذلك البستان-
أريد أن أخبرك الليلة
بأنني في قبضة الذكرى:
سجين دونما سجان

One might fall

into the hands of the jailor, or into the hands of the flowers

...

But tonight I want to tell you,

you, who knows me—

we were together in that garden—

tonight I want to tell you

that I fell into the hands of memory:

a prisoner without a jailor.

For Yūsuf, nostalgia conveys historical change metaphorically and emotionally by signaling that something or someone is gone. It registers the past as past through a special form—a kind of second order or level—of remembrance. “Home,” Seidel notes, “is locus, custom, memory, familiarity, ease, security, sanctuary. And centuries of tradition do not alter the power of home as an image” (1986:10). Here, the poem centers on the power of memory in certain circumstances to recover past states of existence, isolated and framed and glowing with their own life as well as with the emotion that has recalled them—something in the present moment that is shared with a past state. Yūsuf’s speaker implicitly states that psychological life is largely a matter of accumulating a sense of oneself over the years, against which we balance a sense of the present state of our awareness and the flashes of memory that recall to us who and where we have been in the past. When we are cut off from our accumulated self and its “vast structure of recollection,” to use Proust’s words, the resulting depression may be an acute sense of psychic disorder, where the distress

comes from a momentary disordering of the relation of present and past. For Yūsuf, however, this depression will prove to be healthy and useful, exposing him to his own vulnerability so that he can reorient himself in sheer self-defense. What is created in Yūsuf's exile is not only a new space to exercise his being, but a medium through which to reimagine his beginnings. His homeland's landscapes, therefore, do not just exist; they are experienced via their construction in the imagination. Yūsuf is not unique in this sense, for, as Andrew Gurr observes, most exiled writers concentrate on reconstructing the homes they left behind (1981:9). This is given expression in Yūsuf's poem *Marthiyya* ("An Elegy"), written in Algeria shortly after the death of Badr Shākir Al-Sayyāb, Iraq's leading poet at the time. In it he dwells wistfully and reflectively upon his separation from his homeland, while reconstructing, iconographically, the idea and image of Jaykūr (1995:Vol. 1, 436–438):

جيكور مظفأة كان الليل عائق ساكنيها
لا التوت في الأنهار يهبط، لا السماء تشفّ فيها

...
أيوب، في جيكور، ألقى عند قنطرة عصاه
وللحظتين تماوجت في عمق عينيه المياه
والخضرة البيضاء، والصنصاف...
يا عالم المتوحشين ذوي البنادق
حيث الحديث عن الورود سدى...
يا عالما يهبّ الحياة لموته
يهبّ الممات لصوته...
من يشتري جلد المسيح؟
إنا سلخناه، فيا دنيا استريحي.

*

يا بيت جدي في دجى جيكور
يا نخل العراق
قبري وراء التل يستيق القيامة
في وحشة المنفى الأخير، وتستظل به حمامة.
والبرد يُرجفني:
عراق...عراق...ليس سوى العراق.

Jaykūr is turned off as if the night has embraced its dwellers

Neither the mulberry falls into the rivers nor is the sky reflected in them

...

Job, in Jaykūr, has thrown his cane near an arch

and for a minute, the water flared in the depth of his eyes

so did the white plants and the poplar trees...

O world of savages with guns

where every talk about roses is worthless

O world that offers life to its death

who offers death to its voice...

Who would buy the skin of Christ?

We have skinned him. O world, rest assured, then.

...

O grandfather's house in the darkness of Jaykūr

O, palm trees of Iraq

My grave behind the hill competes with doomsday

in the solitude of last exile, and under it, a dove seeks shade...

The cold makes me tremble:

Iraq...Iraq...nothing but Iraq.

Gaston Bachelard's analysis of intimate space, *La poétique de l'espace*, posits home as the crucial site of one's intimate life, the refuge where memory and imagination serve to integrate life's experiences (1994:5). Yūsuf's portrait of his land of birth is searing in its honesty and seems to encapsulate better than anything else the pain of alienation from the nurturing comforts and bonds of home. The arrested, blocked sadness of his lines makes his readers share a death—the death not only of a person, but of an era. The poem is technically accomplished and verbally dexterous, but its primary impact is emotional. The elegy, with its fitful alternation between tranquility and violence, violence and tranquility, bids for sentiment through its virtuosity. Despite the close relationship between Yūsuf and Al-Sayyāb, the former does not allow his elegy to become maudlin. Though, by the time the poem was written, the poet was in exile, the main trappings of the scene depicted are

drawn from his early poetry. The poet's memories revisit experiences of his childhood in Iraq while simultaneously exhibiting an emotional interaction between the writing self and the self recalled. The tutelary spirit behind the poem is surely Al-Sayyāb. Jaykūr becomes for Yūsuf, as it was for Al-Sayyāb, the center of a tangled skein of associations with disparate and intertwining strands. The above lines consist of direct intertextual references to several poems written by Al-Sayyāb himself, mostly in his exile years, which depict the last harsh years in the life of this preeminent Iraqi poet: *Dār Jaddī* ("My Grandfather's House"), *Sifr Ayyūb* ("The Book of Job"), *Al-Masīh ba'da al-Salb* ("Christ after Crucifixion"), *Madīnat Sindibād* ("City of Sindbad"), *Unshūdat al-Matar* ("Hymn to Rain") and especially his celebrated poem *Gharīb 'alā al-Khalīj* ("A Stranger by the Gulf"), which Yūsuf uses for his poem's closure. This is how Al-Sayyāb expresses both his despair and his yearning for his homeland in this poem (1971:320–323):

الريح تصرخ بي : عراق
والموج يعول بي : عراق ، عراق ، ليس سوى عراق...
بين القرى المتهيبات خطاي والمدن الغريبة
غنيت تربتك الحبيبه،
وحملتها فانا المسيح بجر في المنفى صليبه...

The wind cries to me: Iraq.

The wave howls at me: Iraq. Iraq. Nothing but Iraq...

Between villages timid of my footsteps and strange cities,

I sang your beloved soil

and I carried it—for I am Christ in exile dragging his cross.

Yūsuf here intends to give a mirror-like description of his native soil—an unadorned, straightforward picture. Seidel contends that an "imaginative solution to the exile's anguish is to export just enough of the homeland to the outland to metonymically purify it" (1986:10). The complex relationship between "home-haunting" and "home-hunting," as expressed in Yūsuf's poem, is connected to the politics of belonging that is negotiated in the liminal spaces of cultural passages. In this regard, re-homing means keeping cultural continuity elsewhere and engaging in a continuous effort to write home out of the dislocation of life. What we witness is a mixture of contradictory trends: on the one hand, the concept of home has been diluted in the modern world; but on the other, the desire for a home has been intensified more than ever before. Exilic consciousness is hence predicated on an integrated process of home-haunting and home-hunting, in which the exiled poet

may experience a radical discontinuity but, at the same time, develop a desire for cultural reconnection—a kind of nostalgia for retrieving a home that has been lost in the past. Therefore, although absent from the cultural specificity of “this” moment, home is often retrieved or performed in the ambiguous mirror-space of recollection/reflection.

The poet’s memory also responds to the exilic setting by eliciting acrid images from the past. Some of Yūsuf’s exilic poems delineate the past not as past, but as a living presence and the mutability of that present, its fluidity and flux. In the prefatory poem of *Ba’īdan ‘an al-Samā’ al-Ūla* (“Distant from the First Sky”), Yūsuf draws upon the material imagery of rural southern Iraq and describes *Jazīrat al-Saqr*, a small island in Shatt al-‘Arab, near his childhood home (1995:Vol. 1, 329):

جزيرة الصقر!
أرى أكواخك الشهباء في المنفى
منخورة الأعواد، يلهو فوقهن الريح والماء
والشمس- كالتنور – حمراء
...
غابت، وأبقت بعدها للناس ما شاؤوا
الخبز والعنمة والداء.

Jazīrat al-Saqr!

I see your gray huts in exile,

their canes gnawed, wind and water play above them

and the sun—like a furnace—is red

...

It has gone down and left for the people what they want:

bread, darkness and disease.

The poet is aware that nostalgia always issues out of something that once possessed detail, time and place, out of localness; but the effects of nostalgia tend to dematerialize the original object or event, mythifying and enveloping it in an aura. In short, when desire and nostalgia overmaster vision, poetry risks sentimentality. Being aware of this pitfall, Yūsuf strives not to beautify the past, but rather to present it in all its unsightliness and cruelty. The poem obliquely addresses the issue of the *anamnesis* of history. In *anamnesis*, according to Plato in *Meno*, we have

something which Modernism articulated much later as a Proustian *souvenir involontaire*. In this, there is not so much a moment of knowledge of the past, but rather an actual recreation of the past, now fully present: it is, as it were, the actualization of the virtual (Klein, 1989:111; Poulet, 1977). It is this process of “actualization” that is central to Yūsuf’s poem. The speaker travels back in time “mixing memory and desire,” to use T. S. Eliot’s phrase. Yūsuf is crucially concerned to forge a history, to remember, as a therapeutic—and political—act which aims to “suture” the wounds of exile. The poem is structured in such a way that only in the last lines does the sinister aspect of the village come clearly to the fore. It implicitly demands the reader not to view home as static. Traveling between two spaces may suggest a paradoxical re-homing process between two cultural locations, where the home left behind can be found and founded again before us. Therefore, the process of traveling itself, as Sara Ahmed notes, “involves a reliving of the home,” for movement is “the very way in which the migrant subject inhabits the space of home” (1999:344). The protagonist’s feeling is conveyed without threadbare sentimentality or pathos. There is no nostalgia for the innocence of childhood, no merely sentimental recollection. As with other exiled Iraqi poets, Yūsuf’s “passion of the past”—to use a term coined by Tennyson to describe his lost, Edenic childhood—is neither blind nor naïve (Simawe, 2004:79). The then and now serve to promote not misty-eyed reminiscence, but a quiet contemplation of what it means to live in exile in general and by what events the poet’s life has been determined in particular. This is how Michael Seidel expounds this notion:

Exile inaugurates, the long way around, the redemption of individual souls. ... Often in the exilic fable the home place is destroyed, rendered illegitimate, contaminated, or taken over by conquerors or rival claimants. Without a native place recognized as secure, home territory itself is invalidated for those forced to remain behind in it. Thus those in exile are saving remnants; they imagine in new surroundings the conditions that existed before the trauma that necessitated their displacement (1986:8).

The later exile poetry

What constitutes the true originality in Yūsuf’s later output is the combined sensation of strangeness and at-homeness which the poems create. In his later poetry, it is clear that Yūsuf favors the pole of counter-exile, where poetic language acquires a sufficient level of allegory and metaphor and the local is transcended. Talking about his situation as an artist in extended exile, Yūsuf formulates the core of his creativity:

[In exile, the poet] either shows fidelity to his heritage and his native land or, when time goes by, takes his material from the “other land” he lives in. That is, he is no longer dependent upon remembrance and longing (2003:14).

I think of myself now as a poet who is a resident of the world. I don't feel exiled. Being outside my country has become my ordinary life. I am used to it. I feel at home wherever I am ... I have to establish real contact with the country I am in, with the people and with the environment. I have to grasp daily life in its details and minutiae. That is how I write poetry. The details and minutiae are my raw material. I am not conditioning myself to do that; it is direct, honest contact with people, culture, with nature. It is a kind of open receptivity to the world, to the universe (2004, 8–9).

Writing about his mental accommodation to exile in the later period, Yūsuf resolutely states that:

In exile, the poet should become a local citizen. He should establish a relationship with his surroundings, with the natural sights, the people, and the language. He should establish a new spiritual balance or else he will lose the opportunity to go on living on the face of the earth and fall into madness, become deathly ill or commit suicide (1997:120).

Indeed, the later Yūsuf suggests in his poems a resident rather than a traveler or visitor. He seems to absorb more, to have been “there”—wherever “there” may be—a long time. He stands guard against the encroaching, overwhelming power of exile and from this eventuates some of the most piercing, unexpected and vital poetry he has ever written. What is striking, and satisfying about reading his later works is how well Yūsuf holds his own and how firmly he transforms the topic he masters—how his best poems maintain themselves in passion without lacking a strict informing intelligence. What is also important to note about Yūsuf's later poems is that the poet is artistically extending his range and manipulating his material with greater skill and sophistication.

The literature of counter-exile described by Guillén relates to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization: if a text has transcended connections to place or native origin, then it has become deterritorialized. According to their view, deterritorialized texts are characterized by a repression of desire through the taming and confining of its productive energies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977). In Yūsuf's later poetry, the finding of the self through place becomes one of his most

characteristic inventions. When asked about the way he benefited from his exilic experience, Yūsuf replied:

I've benefited from exile in the sense that it has helped me resist my longing for my homeland. ... [T]he element of longing was very obvious in my works, but later I found out that the element of longing was turning into a pathological phenomenon. Since an artist must be balanced—mentally, psychologically and cognitively—he should overcome anything that impedes this balance. I had to overpower my longing or my nostalgia, and I believe that I somehow managed to do so. Then there is a second reason why one should overpower one's longing: the text that I write is based on place. Place, therefore, is present in everything that I write. It is the foundation, whereas longing deprives you of the place, takes you to an imaginary place, which means that you will never be able to make yourself an inhabitant of the place you are in. So even if I am a peripatetic person, the text does not wander: it needs a tangible and discernible ground. For me, this is the morality of the text, its relationship with the place. Indeed because of it, emerges the necessity to overpower longing (2005:10).

Yūsuf's later exile poetry does in fact start from a radical openness to the outer world, an openness which carries its own special danger. The poet is aware that refusing to incur that peril is tantamount to succumbing to mediocre versifying, since lyrical expression requires the hard-won and easily lost determination that Paul Tillich called "the courage to be." The later poems are rich with geographical and literary texture, which supports and gives body to the meditation that forms the main strand of the poem. These poems allow him to negotiate between his often idiosyncratic local observations, autobiographical moments and putatively universal philosophical claims. Clearly, Yūsuf's approach undermines claims by other exiled artists to a natural connection between strong cultural identity and geographic location. His later approach deconstructs the semantic unit identity-place and asserts that writers can also be "at home" when living in different, changing physical surroundings.

In this context, the theoretical distinction made between place and space is helpful (Giddens, 1991; Gupta and Ferguson, 1992). Place has been defined as the actual locality where people live or, in other words, as the material surroundings through which they physically move during their daily routine. Space, by contrast, is "the general idea people have of where things should be in physical and cultural relation to each other" (Donnan and Wilson, 1999:9). In other words, space is a mental picture instead of a particular locality. Anthony Giddens also claims that, in late modernity, the writer's self-perception is no longer limited by identity-place discourses: "While the milieu in which people live quite often remains the source of local attachment, place does not form the parameter of experience, and it does not offer the security of the ever-familiar which traditional locales characteristically

display" (1991:146–147). Reading Yūsuf's later poetry, there can be no doubt that the poet is developing rapidly, seeking out new attitudes, mastering new subtleties of technique, responding to experience with that adaptability both as man and as poet which distinguishes the genuine artist from the talented pedant.

Yūsuf's joining the Palestinian forces in Beirut and his active participation in the combat against the Israeli army marks the beginning of this new chapter in his life, personally and poetically. With the dread of war, in the poet's eyes, there coexisted a compelling attraction—the exhilaration of a new sort of self-knowledge, a change into the changelessness of a "final," permanent self. Paradoxically, it is the fighting alongside the Palestinian forces in a foreign land that initiated the shift in Yūsuf's poetics of exile, which proved indeed to have been the starting point for the actuation of the counter-exile poetics and a crucial turning-point in the poet's exilic consciousness (Al-Nasīr, 2002:17). From the start, Yūsuf devoted himself to the objective reality around him. Hence, his war poems have the freshness and authenticity of personal reactions. War poems, as a principle, insist on an intimacy with often appalling personal experience and confront readers with what the critic Paul Fussell has termed "actual and terrible moral changes" (1966:2).

During the 1982 war, Yūsuf indeed felt compelled to grapple more openly with the fierce subject of war's brutalities. To plunge into the eye of the storm—the fighting itself—required the use of strong and new imaginative devices. The lyric poet's unflinching look at the horror that he sees around him opens up a new kind of poetry for him: instead of seeing the war as accidental, Yūsuf views it as part of the vast tragic pattern of life. As in the best tradition of war poetry, Yūsuf uses the situation of war and its attendant horrors to branch out to new poetic existential vistas.

Yūsuf speaks of the imagination as the most intensive province of pleasure and pain and defines it as a creative power of the mind, representing the images of things in the order and manner in which they were received by the senses or combining them in a new manner and according to a different order. In his poem *Ilā Hāshim Shafīq* ("To Hāshim Shafīq"), dedicated to the exiled Iraqi poet, Yūsuf reasserts his confidence in the poetic act and in the rehabilitating power of the mind against the encroaching nature of exile (1995:Vol. 1, 83–84):

ستكون "بلد"
يوماً، عاصمة الدنيا...
وستبني أنت
-أنت الذاهل في مدن الغيتو
ساحاتٍ
وبساتينٍ
وأكوأخا من سعف وجنوع
وستمكنها
لتكون، ولو نبئت في أوراق الدفتر،
عاصمة الدنيا.

...
من بيني عاصمة للشاعر
غير الشاعر.

You will be “a city”

one day, the capital of the world...

you will build

—you, the befuddled who wanders in the cities of ghettos—

squares,

gardens

and huts made out of palm fronds and trunks.

You will inhabit it

and become, if only inside the leaves of a notebook,

the capital of the world.

...

Who builds a capital for the poet

if not the poet himself?

Indeed, “Writing,” as Theodor Adorno notes in his much celebrated *Minima Moralia*, eventually “becomes a place to live.” Artistic writing becomes the poet’s new homeland and displacement, an important factor in his esthetic make-up (Adorno, 1974:87). That is pretty well what Seamus Heaney means by “redress” when he discusses the purpose of poetry; it is “the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (Heaney, 1995:i). In Heaney’s words:

In the activity of poetry too, there is a tendency to place counter-reality in the scales—a reality which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation. This redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed

alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or threatened by circumstances (1995:3).

The creative spirit remains positively recalcitrant in face of the negative evidence, reminding the indicative mood of history that it has been written in by force and written in over the good optative mood of human potential (1995:24).

In this spirit, Yūsuf's later exilic verse strives to emphasize the *freedom* won in the act of writing in the face of the onslaughts of time. This is how he chooses to open his poem *Al-Hurriyya* ("Freedom") (1995:Vol. 3, 462):

وحبك، أنت الحر
تختار سماء فتسميها
وسماء تسكن فيها
وسماء ترفضها ...

Alone, you are the free one

You choose a sky and name it,

a sky to dwell in,

and a sky to reject....

Indeed, Yūsuf seems to hold out the possibility that the act of writing itself provides a kind of asylum for the displaced artist, and indeed there is something alleviating, something of a solacing and assuaging power, visible in Yūsuf's exilic writings. Writing, in Yūsuf's eyes, is an act which commits the poet to the moral responsibility of ordering the harsh absurdity of existence and replacing it with the text of resistance and its condition of exile. By pitting human resource against the recalcitrant and the inhuman, by pitting the positive effort of the mind against the desolations of natural and historical violence, by interposing his perception and expression, a truly creative writer can transfigure his surrounding conditions. Yūsuf's exile poems, with their vivid images of fractured life, of fortitude in the face of hopeless odds, do indeed possess the authentic touch of poetry. They produce a "story" which stands firmly in its own right and yet is rich in universal significance.

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