

Hine, Alyn Desmond (2011) *Russian literature in the works of Mikhail Naimy*. PhD Thesis.  
SOAS, University of London

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# **Russian Literature in the Works of Mikhail Naimy**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in Arabic Literature

2011

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**Abstract:** This thesis looks at the dialogue between the twentieth-century Lebanese writer, Mikhail Naimy, and Russian literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The term 'dialogue' is based on Bakhtin's idea of a reciprocal and mutually interacting relationship between literary texts, which therefore rejects the notion of influence based on a perceived hierarchy of 'national literatures.' It examines the literary texts of a writer who was educated by the Russian organisation, the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, in schools in Baskinta, Nazareth and Poltava. At the Poltava Seminary, Naimy became so immersed in the Russian language and culture that his teachers believed him to be as versed in Russian literature as any of his Slavic contemporaries. The thesis examines how Naimy's love and interpretation of Russian literature was central to the creative trajectory he explored in Arabic literature in both New York and Lebanon, becoming an accomplished exponent of the art of the short story and critical essay, before he began to explore the possibilities of the novel and the drama. We analyse four key areas of Naimy's writing, spirituality, politics, modes of expression and criticism, in order to ascertain how the dialogue with Russian literature manifested itself. By adopting an area-based study to the varied literary texts, we can consider how Naimy's reading of Russian literature worked in correspondence with his own investigations into the tenets of theosophy, his socialist principles based on childhood experiences, the embracing of the short story and literary journal by the Syro-American literary circle in New York, and his style of criticism that was centred on an emotional response to literature rather than a textual analysis. The thesis also studies how Naimy's relationship with Russian literature in these areas changed over the course of his long literary career.

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Note on transliteration: I have used the Hans Wehr method, as used in *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, J.M. Cowan (ed.) (Urbana, IL: Otto Harrassowitz KG, 1994), of transliterating the names of both authors and texts throughout.

## Introduction

### **Naimy and Russian-Arab Literary Dialogue**

The introduction should be the place, I believe, to address the purpose of the thesis and the primary questions I intend to raise and will attempt to answer, as well as what makes the current thesis unique. I aim to examine the interaction between modern Arabic and Russian literatures<sup>1</sup> by concentrating on one Arab writer, Mikhail Naimy (1889-1988), and his *dialogue* with nineteenth-century Russian literature. Naimy was born in Baskinta, Mount Lebanon, and was introduced to Russian language, literature and culture at an early age. Educated by the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, which established a school in his home village when he was ten years old, Naimy began reading Russian literature in the original language at the Nazareth Seminary in 1902, and later became fully immersed in the language and culture when he won a scholarship to the Poltava Seminary in 1906. Naimy continued to read and work with the Russian language and literature for the rest of his life.

I have taken the term *dialogue* from the ideas of the Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), who rejects the theory of unidirectional influence, where, in an imagined hierarchy of world literatures, minor genres imitate dominant genres, in favour of a reciprocal relationship between texts 'that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other.'<sup>2</sup> Concerning the

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<sup>1</sup> Defining the terms 'modern Arabic literature' and 'Russian literature' shall be one of the objectives of this thesis and, as we shall see, both terms are prone to subjective viewpoints. Used in its broadest sense, 'modern Arabic literature' refers to works and authors associated with *an-nahḍah*, the Arabic literary renaissance of the second half of the nineteenth century and of the twentieth century, while 'Russian literature' shall refer to the authors with whom Naimy interacted most frequently. For the main part, these are authors from the nineteenth century, but some exceptions will be noted.

<sup>2</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; ed. Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), p.47.

dialogue that takes place between Naimy and Russian literature, it is important to remind ourselves at each stage of the analysis of Naimy of two facets that are central to Bakhtin's thinking: firstly, that the dialogue is creative and that as such Naimy's literary works depend upon his own inventiveness as well as an active reading of Russian literature; and secondly, that the literary work, or the *utterance*, always exists in a chain of other interactive utterances rather than in isolation,<sup>3</sup> meaning that each of Naimy's texts bears a complexity that extends far beyond a simple reading of Russian literature. By using this methodology I will ensure that the thesis is a study of this complex pattern of creativity, rather than a comparative exercise or a study of basic influence. The methodology and details of the term 'dialogue' shall be revisited and explored throughout the text, especially chapter two, which requires examining the dialogue from a complicated political context.

My primary reason for investigating the dialogue between Russian and Arabic literatures is the lack of attention paid to the subject in academic literature written in English. Traditional Western views of Arabic literary history, those published in the United States and Western Europe, have concentrated more on modern Arabic literature's debt to European, particularly French and English, literatures. The main reason for this is that, although there is some evidence to suggest progress and development towards modernisation in Arabic literature before the nineteenth century,<sup>4</sup> it is a perception widely held amongst academics that the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798 heralded

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<sup>3</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee; ed. Emerson and Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006), p.93.

<sup>4</sup> See Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (London: Saqi, 1993), pp.38-42: 'Early Signs of Cultural Revival.' See also Khalidi, Rashid, *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

the introduction of modernisation to Arabic literature.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the intellectual historian, Albert Hourani<sup>6</sup>, denotes the encounter between Egypt and France as the catalyst for much modernisation in Egyptian society and culture, citing how the first interaction with Europe eventually led to a vast overhaul of administration, education, bureaucracy and culture in Egypt during the regime of Muḥammad 'Alī (1770-1848). As academics have viewed Egypt as a pre-eminent centre of cultural significance in the Arab world, there has been a tendency to view the progress of Arabic literature towards modernity as ineluctably linked to European literary models whose respective governments had either colonial or trade interests in the Middle East during the period of *an-nahḍah* (namely the nineteenth and twentieth centuries): France, Great Britain, and to a lesser extent Germany and Italy.<sup>7</sup> This perception of the development of modern Arabic literature, which has sometimes viewed early modern Arabic literary works as imitative of dominant English and French genres, largely ignores the presence of Russian literature in its evolution on account of the linguistic barriers such a study entails.

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<sup>5</sup> This view is, of course, not unanimous. While M. M. Badawi (*The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. M. M. Badawi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) esp. pp.4-6) and Matti Moosa (*The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* (Boulder, CO: Three Continents, 1997)) are quite adamant about the crucial effect of the Napoleonic invasion on Arabic literature, Paul Starkey, for example, retains a more equivocal approach, questioning its influence beyond Egypt (*Modern Arabic Literature (The New Edinburgh Islamic Surveys)* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006) p.24).

<sup>6</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> On this note, in addition to authors listed above who make the connection apparent, we may refer as a prominent example to Pierre Cachia's *Arabic Literature: An Overview* (London: Routledge, 2002), whose comments on the development of Arabic drama and the Arabic novel make plain their indebtedness to European progenitors. In his introduction to *Modern Arabic Literature* (op. cit.), Badawi also points out the 'borrowing of European forms' in *an-nahḍah*, but also warns that modern Arabic literature 'never really completely severed its link with its [Arabic] past' (p.1).

Nevertheless, certain studies on the Arabic literary renaissance in general (*an-nahḍah*) and on Naimy and other members of *al-mahjar*<sup>8</sup> in particular, and I shall make these explicit later on, argue that an appreciation of Russian literature was vital to certain (especially Levantine) Arab writers of the early twentieth century and integral to how they expressed themselves in their literary works. What these studies did not make clear, however, was to which era or works of Russian literature they were referring in stating its significance. Whilst I believe that these works have been accurate in their assumption of the importance of Russian literature, few studies have identified particular Russian authors with whom Arab writers dialogized in the creation of their literary texts, and of those even fewer highlighted singular Russian literary works. Nor have the studies endeavoured to outline, for instance, how the development of the novel in Russian literature was a reaction to the local political circumstances of the nineteenth century, and how comparable political parameters in the Arab world helped to produce similar literary genres. My thesis is responsive to both of these missing elements in Arabic literary studies and will seek to provide both context and specificity for the term 'Russian literature' by focusing on a single Lebanese author and his creative dialogue with variegated strands of Russian writing.

Mikhail Naimy is not the only Arab writer to explore his relationship with Russian literature. Other Arab novelists have acknowledged their active reading of Russian literature and its relevance to their creativity both explicitly in interviews and tacitly in their fiction. Tawfiq al-Ḥakīm (1898[?]-1987), in his

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<sup>8</sup> The word *mahjar* means 'place of emigration' or simply 'emigration.' The term *al-mahjar* has come to mean 'the Arab diaspora' in its widest sense, but is most commonly used for Arabs who emigrated to North and South America. In this thesis, the term shall refer to Arabs who emigrated from the Levant to North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

novel, *Uṣfūr min aš-šarq* (1938; Bird from the East, 1966), imagines an ideological and cultural proximity and understanding between the Arab World and Socialist Russia, personified through the characters of Muḥsin and Ivan, who both denounce the West as materialistic and superficial (these are ideas that I will explore with regards to Naimy in both his essays and fiction). Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) listed Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov as being amongst his favourite writers, a fact borne out by his fiction.<sup>9</sup> As a final prominent example, the contemporary Libyan (or Tuareg) writer, Ibrahim al-Koni (1948-), studied comparative literature at the Gorky Institute in Moscow and it is possible to trace his own dialogue with Russian literature through some of his novels.

While Russian literature, then, clearly has a strong presence in modern Arabic culture, Arabic critical studies of Russian literature remain fairly rare. The volumes published in the twentieth century show there is a tendency amongst Arab academics to concentrate on Russian writers who are not only amongst the best-known outside Russia, but who symbolised to Arab readers in various ways the struggle against governmental oppression, namely, Pushkin,<sup>10</sup> Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.<sup>11</sup> Maḥmūd's slim, largely biographical volume on Dostoevsky is notable for his observation that Western Europe, up to the First World War, did not consider Russia to be part of Europe; Ṣidqī's work on Pushkin also mostly reads as a biography, commencing with an account of how Pushkin's Ethiopian great-grandfather came to be a page at

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<sup>9</sup> Sasson Somekh, *The Changing Rhythm* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), p.45.

<sup>10</sup> See Najātī Ṣidqī, *Buṣḥkīn : amīr shu'arā' Rūsiyā* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1945).

<sup>11</sup> See Ḥasan Maḥmūd, *Dūstuyīfskī : ḥayātuḥu al-muḍḥarabah* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, [ca.1950]) on Dostoevsky alone; and Mamdūḥ Abū-l-Wayy, *Tūlstūy wa Dūstuyīfskī fī-l-adab al-'Arabī : dirāsah* (Damascus: Ittiḥād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab, 1999) on both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

Peter the Great's court and, incidentally, includes an introduction written by Naimy. I shall look more closely at how these Russian writers were perceived as advocates for persecuted minorities not only by Naimy but by other Arab writers later in the thesis, especially in chapter two.

Two more general Arabic critical works on Russian literature by Drs. Sharārah and Ghamrī have concentrated on the literary works being produced in the nineteenth century, particularly the novel.<sup>12</sup> These works should be seen as introductions, or guides, to what as readers we may consider to be the canonical works of nineteenth-century Russian prose fiction. Dr. 'Alā' ad-Dīn provides a more focused analysis of a specific aspect of Russian literature by looking at the manifestation of realism in Soviet and Arabic literature mainly of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, Russian academic interest in the Arab world has a long and established history. Oriental studies became a subject of general scholarly interest in the time of Peter the Great (1672-1725),<sup>14</sup> during whose reign the collection of ancient and medieval Oriental manuscripts and books was commenced in St Petersburg. It was in the first half of the nineteenth century, however, that Oriental studies became an established academic discipline in Russia's major universities. Three academics in particular stand out as pioneers from this period: Aleksei Vasilyevich Boldyrev (1780-1842) was

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<sup>12</sup> See Ḥayāt Sharārah, *Madkhal ilā-l-adab ar-rūsī fī-l-qarn at-tāsi' 'ashar* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasat al-'Arabiyyah li-d-Dirāsāt wa-n-Nashr, 1978) and Makārim Ghamrī, *al-Riwāyat ar-rūsīyah fī al-qarn at-tāsi' 'ashar* (Kuwait: al-Majlis al-Waṭanī li-ṭ-Ṭaqāfah wa-al-Funūn wa-al-Adāb, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> See Mājid 'Alā' ad-Dīn: *al-Wāqī'iyah fī al-adabayn al-sovyetī wa-al-'arabī* (Damascus: Dār at-Ṭaqāfah, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, in 'The Imperial Roots of Soviet Orientology' from *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, eds. Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), remarks that 'Orientology as an academic discipline in Russia begins with Peter the Great's reign,' p.29.

appointed to teach Oriental (Arabic and Persian) languages at Moscow University in 1811 and approached his studies from a philological perspective; the prominent writer and literary critic, Osip Ivanovich Senkovsky (1800-58), was the professor of Turkish and Arabic philology at St Petersburg University from 1822 to 1847; while Mirza Aleksandr Kasimovich Kazem-Beg (1802-70) taught a number of disciplines, from Islamic jurisprudence to Tatar, while serving as a professor in Kazan (1826-45) and St Petersburg (1845-70).<sup>15</sup> These three academics helped to cement Arabic philology in Russia and, in the case of Kazem-Beg, establish Russia's international reputation for the study of Arab-Islamic culture.

The study of the Arabic language and Islamic culture continued to grow in Russia under the direction of linguistic and religious specialists such as Vladimir Fedorovich Girgas (1835-87) and Victor Romanovich Rosen (1849-1908). Agafangel Efimovich Krimsky (1871-1942) is especially relevant to this study on account of his remarkably detailed descriptions of many strata of social life in nineteenth-century Lebanon. His collection of letters from Lebanon<sup>16</sup> also provide invaluable insight into how Russia and its relations with the Middle East were comprehended by the Arab populace.

Of even greater importance though is the figure of Ignaty Yulianovich Krachkovsky (1883-1951), who was a pioneer in Arabic literary scholarship and left a considerable academic legacy for other scholars, such as Anna

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<sup>15</sup> Kazam-bek was not the first Professor of Oriental Letters at Kazan. Nevertheless, I have not included his two predecessors as they were Germans who did not know Russian (see Kemper and Conermann, p.32). We should also mention here Muḥammad 'Ayyād aṭ-Ṭanṭāwī, an Azharī who taught in St Petersburg from 1840 and who assumed the Arabic Chair at the university from 1847. However, he appears to have left no significant scholarly legacy (*Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Brill online, 2012).

<sup>16</sup> A.E. Krimsky, *Pis'ma iz Livana* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka" Glavnaya Redaktsiya Vostochnoi Literaturi, 1975).

Arkad'evna Dolinina (1923-) and 'Umar Muḥammad (who has published in both Russian and Arabic), to follow. Krachkovsky's vast range of expertise included classical and medieval literature, but, as regards this thesis, one of his most significant contributions to scholarship was to be the first academic outside of the Arab world to produce academic works on modern Arabic literature. Krachkovsky's essay, *Poltavskii seminarist* (The Poltava Seminarist), from his collection of essays, *Among Arabic Manuscripts*,<sup>17</sup> constituted the first time a non-Arab academic had published a study of Naimy; Krachkovsky worked with the assistance of Naimy himself and gleaned much of his information from a letter Naimy wrote to Krachkovsky from New York, in English, in which he stressed that Russian literature had been the foundation stone upon which he had built his career.<sup>18</sup> Krachkovsky's continuing presence in Russian studies of the Arab world and its culture can be seen in two journals published regularly in St. Petersburg: 'Rossiya i arabskii mir' and 'Manuscripta orientalia.'

Many other studies exist of Mikhail Naimy, and I shall explain below why I feel that my thesis differs from the works already produced and provides an original contribution to the corpus. As stated above, the dialogue between Russia and the Arab world has been established over three centuries, but we will remain unable to understand how it directly affects the creative production of literary works without looking specifically at the dialogue in process in particular writers, which is what I intend to do with Naimy.

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<sup>17</sup> Originally published as *Nad arabskimi rukopisyami: listki vospominanii o knigakh i lyudyakh* (Moscow / Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1946); reprinted in English as *Among Arabic Manuscripts* (Leiden: Brill, 1953).

<sup>18</sup> The original copy of this letter is in the St Petersburg Academy of Sciences archive and was reprinted in *Die Welt des Islams* (Bd.13, January, 1932) under the title, 'Mīḳā'īl Nu'aymah's Autobiographie' by Mīḳā'īl Nu'aymah and Ignaty Krachkovsky.

Amongst those Arabic works that are of greater relevance to this thesis are studies that have attempted to provide a more general examination of Naimy's life and works. Studies produced in the Arabic language are reasonably plentiful, although by no means commonplace when compared to, for instance, his contemporary, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, and place Naimy within the context of Arab literary poetics and of modern Arabic literature emergent at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> As is suggested by their titles, Sayyid concentrates on the contribution to modern Arabic literature Naimy made through his literary criticism, while 'Alwan considers Naimy's philosophical thought and mainly examines his faith and spiritual beliefs; Ḥammūd's and Ka'dī's assessments are more general surveys that attempt to chart the myriad philosophical interests in Naimy's life and works.

Muḥammad Šafīq Šayyā also looks at Naimy from a philosophical perspective and attempts to make a thorough examination of Naimy's thought by viewing his writings as a bridge between Islamic and Western philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Both Riyāḍ Fākūrī and Ṭurayyā 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Malḥas focus the attention of the reader onto the Sufi aspects of Naimy's writings.<sup>21</sup> Although largely unrelated to this thesis in its subject matter as they probe the relationship between Sufi thought and Naimy's writings, Malḥas' and Fākūrī's works are

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<sup>19</sup> See Ka'dī Farhūd Ka'dī, *Miḳā'il Nu'aymah bayna qurrā'ihī wa-'ārifihī* (Beirut: [?], 1971), Shafī' Sayyid, *Miḳā'il Nu'aymah: manhajuhu fī al-naqd wa ittijāhuhu fī al-adab* (Cairo: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1972), Muḥammad al-Habīb 'Alwan, *Miḳā'il Nu'aymah: hayātuhu wa tafkīruhu* (Tunis: Dār Bu Salāma li-ṭ-Ṭab'a wa-n-Nashr wa-t-Tauzī', 1986) and Muḥammad Ḥammūd, *Miḳā'il Nu'aymah adīban : naqd, shī'r, qiṣṣah* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Lubnānī, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> See Muḥammad Šafīq Šayyā, *Falsafat Miḳā'il Nu'aymah* (Beirut: Manšūrāt biḥusūn aṭ-Ṭaqāfiyyah, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> See Riyāḍ Fākūrī, *Tis'ūn Miḳā'il Nu'aymah (wuqūf fī-l-muwājaha)* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Muwarid aṭ-Ṭaqāfiyya, 1981) and Ṭurayyā 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Malḥas, *Miḳā'il Nu'aymah: al-adīb al-ṣūfī* (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-lubnānī, 1986). Works which look at the broader aspect of Naimy's approach to religion and spirituality also include Khalīl Dhiyāb Abū Jahjah, *ar-Ru'yah al-kawniyah fī adab Miḳā'il Nu'aymah : muḥāwala kashf al-maḳūlāt al-fikriya fī ru'ya Nu'aymah ilā Allāh wa-al-kawn wa-al-insān, kaynūnah wa 'alāqāt* (Beirut: Manshūrāt Ittihād al-Kuttāb al-Lubnānyīn, 2004) and, in French, Afifa Ghaiṯ's *La pensée religieuse chez Gubrān Kalīl Gubrān et Miḳā'il Nu'aymah* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1990).

useful in demonstrating how one may interpret the writer's works through one selected and clearly vital prism; an aspect that is also true of Khalīl Kafūrī's study, which scrutinises the attitude Naimy and Jibrān had towards Masonic tradition.<sup>22</sup> From a linguistic perspective, 'Afīf Dimašqīyah considers the registers of the Arabic language used in Naimy's short stories and their various functions in the narrative - a topic that is of great interest to scholars as Naimy oscillated between literary and dialectical Arabic in many of his works.<sup>23</sup>

Studies in English are usually broader and therefore lack a particular viewpoint through which to look at Naimy's works. Nadeem Naimy provides a detailed overview of the majority of Mikhail Naimy's works<sup>24</sup> and has the added benefit of being the writer's nephew, which presumably gives Nadeem access to more personal documents and insights on the man. C. Nijland also gives a clinical and highly useful analysis of Naimy's works, which he splits into chapters concerning genres (narrative prose and poetry), main characters in Naimy's life (Jibrān) and facets of Naimy's personality and literary works ('The Preacher' deals with his spiritual views).<sup>25</sup> These works are pioneering studies that have introduced Mikhail Naimy to an audience whose only previous engagement with the writer would have been through translations of his biography of Jibrān, or from J. R. Perry's collection of translated works.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Khalīl Kafūrī, *Jibrān wa Nu'aymah al-māsūniyān* (Beirut: Dār al-Maktabah al-Ahliyyah, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> See 'Afīf Dimašqīyah *al-Infī'āliyah wa-al-iblaghiyah fī ba'd aqāsiṣ Miḳā'il Nu'aymah* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārābī, 1974).

<sup>24</sup> See Nadeem Naimy, *Mikhail Naimy: an Introduction* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1967).

<sup>25</sup> See C. Nijland, *Miḳā'il Nu'aymah: Promotor of the Arabic Literary Revival* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut, 1975).

<sup>26</sup> J. R. Perry, *A New Year: Stories, autobiography and poems* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

Regardless of their erudition and achievement, the studies mentioned above do not investigate sufficiently the dialogue with Russian literature in Naimy's works and this, I feel, is proving to be a significant absence in our understanding of the writer. That Russian literature was a consistent presence in his life and works appears to be beyond dispute; all critics who summarise the most remarkable features of his childhood and early adult life, the work of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society in Baskinta, Naimy's education in Nazareth and Poltava, and the tendency of *al-Funūn*, the Arabic literary journal to which Naimy regularly contributed, to publish translations of Russian literature, make the connection between Naimy and Russian literature explicit. However, up until now few studies in English have analysed properly the dialogue between Naimy and Russian literature and how he was appropriating its tropes and styles and adapting them for his own use.

The closest to filling this gap in scholarship has been accomplished by Aida Imangulieva, to whom I feel indebted for my own work. Imangulieva published two important studies on Naimy, analysing his links to Russian literature. The first, *Mikhail Naime i assosiyatsiya pera* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka" Glavnaya Redaktsiya Vostochnoi Literaturi, 1975), is still only available in Russian and explores the contribution that Naimy and the 'Pen League' (*ar-Rābiṭah al-qalamiyyah*), the literary group that was created by the writers associated with the *mahjar* literary journal, *al-Funūn*, made towards the development of modern Arabic literature. Her second book, which came out during the course of this thesis, *Jibrān, Rihani & Naimy: East-West interactions in early twentieth-century Arab literature* (Oxford: Inner Farne Press, 2009), is much closer in spirit to my own thesis. In her study,

Imangulieva details some superb insights into the presence of specific authors in particular literary works of Naimy, for instance, making comparisons between Naimy's literary criticism and that of Belinsky. Furthermore, Imangulieva accurately depicts Tolstoy as being a primary foundation stone in the formation of Naimy's *Weltanschauung*. As informative as Imangulieva's work is, however, I contend that concentrating solely on particular Russian authors and treating them in isolation as dominant forces in Naimy's literary works can portray Naimy as a slavish imitator of Russian authors and wanders into the realm of an influence study that I am trying to avoid.

In order to pursue my own research into the Bakhtinian dialogue, as I have described it above, between Naimy and Russian literature, I will adopt a somewhat unorthodox approach to Naimy's works in this study. While many critical works on Naimy, including most of those detailed above, rely on a chronological approach to the writer's literary texts, I feel that for discussing Naimy's dialogue with Russian literature it will be more productive to look at four specific areas of his writing, spirituality, politics, modes of literary expression and criticism, to discuss how his *Weltanschauung* was in a state of constant adaptation, but also supported core values that remained consistent throughout his lifetime. Examining these specific areas will give us an insight into how Naimy's background and reading of Russian literature by turns reinforced and mutated his literary outlook over the course of his long life, while simultaneously appreciating which fundamental tenets of his thought stayed true during his literary career. For a writer who operated in a number of different literary areas and genres, it seems logical to distinguish between the areas of intellectual application on which Naimy seemed to concentrate

singularly. A chronological approach would lose the fluency and coherence that the chapters attempt to convey; Naimy's style changed so radically over almost seventy years of writing and covered such a vast plethora of topics that a chronological approach would necessarily have to jump awkwardly between various strands of thought. My area-based approach will, I hope, set out Naimy's formulated literary and philosophical trajectories more clearly in tandem with his reading of Russian literature than a chronological survey of his works.

At this point, I should emphasise that the thesis is intended to be a case study of one particular writer in a particular set of circumstances and as such my intention is to examine Naimy's reading of Russian literature and how it manifested itself in his own literary works. My analysis then will always gravitate more towards illuminating the context of Naimy's own literary texts, rather than those which he was reading, although in some cases some contextual analysis of the Russian literature Naimy was reading will be beneficial to further explication.

I start from an acute awareness that dialogue between literary texts is a complex process. As Jauss postulates in his classic study, both reception and intertextual dialogue are vital to the literary approach:

[The] relationship of work to work must now be brought into this interaction between work and mankind, and the historical coherence of works among themselves must be seen in the interrelations of production and reception.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1982), p.19.

It is only possible to understand and describe a small fraction of these interactions and thus my analysis of Russian literature in the works of Naimy will necessarily have to be restricted by space. However, analysis of even some of those interactions is vital for our understanding of that writer. In the case of Naimy, I show how he came to make distinct choices in his reading of Russian literature and how, by forming a dialogue with the genre, produced highly distinctive works of modern Arabic literature.

## **Chapter One**

### **Naimy's Spirituality: A Dialogue with Russian Literature**

#### **Introduction**

Faith, spirituality and religion: Mikhail Naimy found himself engaging with all of these matters, from his Orthodox Christian upbringing in Lebanon to adoption of the worldview of theosophy while in the United States,<sup>28</sup> throughout the course of the ninety-eight years of his life. Spirituality in particular formed a central part of his short stories, novels and intellectual essays. Like some of his contemporary Arab writers, such as Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Naimy had become disinterested in organised religion quite early on in life and found it hard to subscribe to the tenets of faith as prescribed by the Church in Christianity. Rather than become an atheist, however, Naimy retained and recognised his basic craving for spirituality, but sought an alternative form of pursuing and practising his beliefs – one that was personal and private, rather than communal. In doing so, Naimy was following a path that had been trodden down by other thinkers at the turn of the twentieth century, such as Leo Tolstoy, William James and Ḳalīl Jibrān, who tried to

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<sup>28</sup> Theosophy is a mystical philosophy that, in its modern form, was largely devised by the Russian thinker, Helena Blavatsky, and, as a key facet of Naimy's worldview, we shall have reason to refer to theosophical principles throughout this thesis. By way of introduction to the beliefs of theosophy, I will quote here from Helena Blavatsky's own summation of its ideas: '[The object of this system is] First of all to inculcate certain great moral truths upon its disciples, and all those who were "lovers of the truth." Hence the motto adopted by the Theosophical Society: "There is no religion higher than truth." The chief aim of the founders of the Eclectic Theosophical School was one of the three objects of its modern successor, the Theosophical Society, namely, to reconcile all religions, sects and nations under a common system of ethics, based on eternal verities.' (Helena Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893), p.3.)

forge a new approach towards spirituality that would encompass the principles of many faiths, both Eastern and Western.

Naimy's spirituality always seemed to be something of a work in progress, a construction to which he added and modified over the course of his life. This chapter shall attempt to chart the most consistent aspects of his relationship with spirituality and find out how he drew upon his readings and experience to mould his own stance vis-à-vis faith. It is my contention that at the core of Naimy's multi-faith spiritual identity lies a Christian nucleus and that Naimy's interpretation of Christianity was directed in a fundamental part by his reading of a particular strand of classic, nineteenth-century Russian literature. To this end, this examination of Naimy's spirituality will adhere to Jauss' notion that. 'In this process of the history of reception [...] the reappropriation of past works occurs simultaneously with the perpetual mediation of past and present art and of traditional evaluation and current literary attempts.'<sup>29</sup>

### **Baskinta's Christian Identity – A Short History**

By the late nineteenth century, Naimy's home village of Baskinta had already established a fairly stable religious identity for a number of centuries. Groups of Aramaic-speaking Christians first settled there since around the seventh century and, in spite of being only fifty kilometres outside Beirut, its isolated geographical location, cool climate and inhospitable terrain meant that the area was avoided by Arab settlers.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Mount Lebanon's natural separation from the surrounding area also resulted in Baskinta's

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<sup>29</sup> Jauss (1982), p.20.

<sup>30</sup> Farīda Abū-Ḥaidar, *A Study of the Spoken Arabic of Baskinta* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), p.1.

retention of a particular dialect that was made the subject of Farīda Abū-Ḥaidar's detailed study of the area's spoken tongue.<sup>31</sup> Politically, the area of Mount Lebanon, in which Baskinta lies, experienced centuries of varying degrees of autonomy under the *iltizām* system of the Ottoman Empire from 1523 to 1842.<sup>32</sup> After years of bloody conflict and rivalry, the French-sponsored, Christian *Mutaṣarrifiya* administration brought peace and stability, along with a settled religious identity, to the region in 1861.<sup>33</sup>

When Abū-Ḥaidar's study of Baskinta was published in 1979, the religious self-identity of the village was evident with the population entirely Christian, comprising Maronite and Orthodox populations in roughly two-thirds and one-third proportions, respectively.<sup>34</sup> The exclusively Maronite and Orthodox composition of its population meant that Baskinta was unaffected by the proselytising missions from the Catholic and Protestant churches, who became active in Syria when it became clear that the Ottoman Empire was disintegrating and Christian Arabs would want protection from another Great Power.<sup>35</sup> Instead, the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS) of Russia, realising the strength of popular support for the Orthodox Church in the area,<sup>36</sup> established a school in Baskinta in 1899 (a quite remarkable piece of luck for

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.2.

<sup>32</sup> Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto, 2007), pp.3-40.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp.41-51. Also Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (London: Tauris, 1988), p.25.

<sup>34</sup> Abū-Ḥaidar (1979), p.4.

<sup>35</sup> See Derek Hopwood, *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine 1843-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969) and Hanna Abu Hanna, *Ṭalāī an-nahḍah fi filasṭīn* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Hopwood (1969): 'The society was so much caught up in the enthusiasm of 1899 that it declared: "We now realize that Syria is the area on which to concentrate [...] Power lies in Syria and not in Palestine,"' p.150.

the Baskinta population considering the small size of the village<sup>37</sup>) and gained instant popularity as no school had been there previously.<sup>38</sup>

### **Orthodox Christianity in the Community – Naimy’s Childhood**

Writing with the perspective of hindsight, Naimy recalls the foundation of the IOPS school in his autobiography, *Sab’ūn*, as an event of immense significance in the village.<sup>39</sup> What we read is an account that is not so much concerned with the religious praxis, the act of going to a church for instance, but rather divulges the indirect effect that the Christian atmosphere had upon his family life and the Christian-influenced social interactions that defined his childhood, as we discuss below.

After Naimy’s own literary, pensive introduction to the autobiography (*bāb al-kitāb*), the first chapter of the actual memoirs – *Ab fi al-samā’ wa ab fi amrīkā* (A Father in Heaven and a Father in America)<sup>40</sup> – concisely indicates the two most dominant issues in Baskinta in the late nineteenth century, which would come to have a bearing in some way on Naimy’s complete works and his whole life: religion and exile.<sup>41</sup> The prayers that Naimy recited with his mother in childhood are indicative of a family practice that felt a reverential

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<sup>37</sup> Around 4000 in Abū-Ḥaidar’s study, p.4.

<sup>38</sup> The history of the IOPS and Russia’s involvement in Syria and Palestine is a complex and fascinating issue to which I cannot do justice here. Again, I would point readers to Hopwood’s and Hanna’s studies for a more complete overview of the historical events.

<sup>39</sup> See volume 1 of *Sab’ūn*, especially the chapter *al-Madrasāt ar-rūsīya*, pp.109-122. (All quotations and references from Mikhail Naimy, *Sab’ūn* (Beirut: Naufal, 2008) (3 vols.)) All subsequent references to *Sab’ūn* are taken from the Naufal edition.

<sup>40</sup> *Sab’ūn*, pp.19-34.

<sup>41</sup> Traboulsi traces the vast increase in emigration to the ‘New World’ back to the establishment of the *Mutaṣarrifiya*, which resulted not only in Mount Lebanon’s autonomy, but also in a dependence on both Europe and Syria to furnish its basic economic needs. Coupled with a population boom and limited land for cultivation, mass emigration ensued (Traboulsi (2007), pp.41-7).

need to worship the Lord as a daily routine, but combined the spiritual dimension of prayer with practical considerations that arose as a result of having seen so many family members make essential and prolonged trips to the Americas for financial reasons.<sup>42</sup> Naimy even describes the supplementary prayers that his mother made after the standard Lord's Prayer as being of primary importance:

As soon as my mother had finished the Lord's Prayer, she moved on to a long supplication for those who occupied the first rank in her heart and life: 'Say with me, son, "O Lord, bring success to my father in America. May the land he keeps be turned into gold. O Lord, return him safely to us. O Lord, protect my brothers. O Lord, protect my Uncle Ibrahim and my Uncle Sulayman, bring them success and bless them with children. O Lord..."'<sup>43</sup>

Here, the presence of the word 'gold' is illuminating, as are the appeals to God to bless Naimy's uncles with children. For in spite of the repetitious prayers heard and spoken early on in his life, Naimy would grow up to shun these two aspects of the prayer, which were particularly accentuated by his mother and, we can assume by the large families and predominance of young people leaving the country,<sup>44</sup> the wider society as a whole. Naimy would neither marry nor have children at any time in his life, nor would he actively seek great wealth. As his autobiography and many of his intellectual essays explicitly maintain, in spite of being persuaded to move to the United States

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<sup>42</sup> Two of Naimy's brothers, Adib and Haikal, moved to the United States permanently in the 1900s (see *Sab'ūn* (all vols)).

<sup>43</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.19.

<sup>44</sup> 'Between 1860 and 1914, roughly a third of the inhabitants of Mount Lebanon left the country' (Traboulsi, p.47).

by his brothers, Naimy was horrified by the mechanisms of American society which revolved around making money by any plausible means, and was particularly repelled by New York which moved and acted like a devouring beast that sought profit over spirituality – a ‘monster-city,’ as he described it in a letter to his brother in Walla Walla.<sup>45</sup> His own father, too, came to detest the USA, as well as all semblances of riches, as his quest to ameliorate his family’s fortunes resulted in no more money and the death of his younger sister in California.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, the experiences of his father in the United States may have contributed to his relatively half-hearted attitude towards the creation of wealth and attainment of personal riches.

Naimy’s autobiography, written from a different, older perspective, describes his poor and agrarian childhood self as seeking a different type of gold in the idyllic setting of his very early life in Baskinta and Shakroub, where his days were spent engaged in helping his brothers by working with the livestock, to which his father had turned after his disappointments in America. The impression given by Naimy in *Sab’ūn* is of a prelapsarian bliss to be found in the immaterial, agricultural setting of Baskinta and Shakroub at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>47</sup>

In keeping with the tradition of the village, Naimy also went with his brothers and other boys to the local school that had been founded as a permanent fixture by the Greek Orthodox Church:

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<sup>45</sup> See Nadeem Naimy, *Mikhail Naimy* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1967), p.160.

<sup>46</sup> ‘The world darkened in the eyes of my father’ (*Sab’ūn* I, p.90).

<sup>47</sup> *Sab’ūn* I, chapters *Min dīkrayāt aṭ-ṭufūla* and *Bu yūsuf wa ‘umm yūsuf*, pp.35-56, give a depiction of the young boy playing with his friends, learning with his brothers, and spending time with his elderly grandparents.

Undoubtedly, the upper echelons of the Greek Orthodox sect in Baskinta were proud of having prepared for their denomination a school with two classrooms and two teachers, after having previously had a school that moved from one church to another. Their teacher, however, was a semi-literate man who earned nothing in wages other than 'his daily bread.'<sup>48</sup>

Naimy's school did not intend to teach the children very much beyond the fundamental basics of a stripped-down Christian education. Nadeem Naimy, who had much personal contact with the author during the later decades of his life by virtue of being his nephew, claims that Naimy's achievements at the end of his first Baskinta schooling – knowledge of the Arabic and French alphabets and a complete reading of the *Booklet of Blessedness* (a selection of the Psalms of David) – would have been for most Baskinta children where education both ended and began, had the IOPS not founded a more modern and comprehensive school in the village in 1899.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Scope of Naimy's Russian Orthodox Christian Education**

After the unassuming educational programme of Baskinta's primary school, the apparently serendipitous decision of the IOPS to establish a school in Baskinta seems in hindsight to have been a monumental point in the history of modern Arabic literature for its readers, and for Naimy a natural occurrence in the Universal Law (*an-niḏām al-kaunī*). Here, we can examine the effect upon Naimy of another foreign educational establishment entering his village with

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<sup>48</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.83.

<sup>49</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.110.

apparently more intellectual ambition and a radically different approach to pedagogy:

For the first time in its history Baskinta knew what might be called an ideal school. And for the first time, girls could go to school alongside boys. The school included five men teachers and three women. At the head was a Principal who was a graduate of the Russian Teachers' Institute in Nazareth, Palestine, and had studied education, teaching and school administration. For the first time we felt that we were in a school which had a particular system and a programme.<sup>50</sup>

The programme to which Naimy refers was centred largely around language and literature. Regarding the latter of these two fields, Naimy was very fortunate to be attending the Baskinta school when it had just opened and was being directed by a young, aspirant graduate of the Nazareth Seminary who was enthusiastic to the point of evangelism about Russian literature and saw it as a potential model for Arabic literature. His name was Ḳalīl Baydas and he would become a famous name in the history of Arabic literature through his creation of the first Palestinian literary journal, *an-Nafā'is al-ʿaṣriyyah*, which became an important contribution to the development of a modern Arabic literary prose style through its introduction of Russian literature to Arab readers, along with original Arabic short stories.<sup>51</sup>

In spite of being run by an organisation that had initially been founded in order to assist Russian pilgrims to the Holy Lands, the religious features of the daily school life in Baskinta were merely statutory in nature: attending mass in

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ḳalīl Baydas is described as a 'pioneer' in Hanna Abu-Hanna's work *Ṭalā'ī an-nahḍah fi filasṭīn*.

a Greek Orthodox church on Sunday was compulsory, as was the chanting of prayers at the start and end of each school day.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the daily, Christian rituals that had already been planted by the prayer recitals with his mother were forming a bedrock of religious principles for Naimy; they would be reinforced in 1902 when Naimy won a scholarship and moved to Nazareth to study at the seminary.<sup>53</sup>

Nazareth and its Christianity-associated environment had two important effects upon the adolescent Naimy. The first result was that Naimy's interest in Russian literature was augmented dramatically by his more competent linguistic abilities. At Baskinta he had experienced merely an introduction to the language, but at Nazareth this was transformed into an expertise that allowed him to tap into the *kanz* (Arabic: treasure)<sup>54</sup> that Russian literature offered before him. Suddenly, he was daring to read actual stories by Russian authors. Interestingly, even when he did not understand all the words presented to him on the page, Naimy felt that he had connected with a world that was, at that time, the most important literary reservoir he had hitherto encountered:

The more my knowledge of the Russian language increased, the greater became my enthusiasm to read in it. While in Nazareth, I read some of the novels of Jules Verne translated into Russian. I also read some stories of Chekhov and Tolstoy, and read Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* right through to the end, in spite of not being able to

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<sup>52</sup> Nadeem Naimy, op. cit., p.73.

<sup>53</sup> The seminary, which was founded in order to train students to become teachers, was opened by the IOPS in 1898 (Hanna (2005), p.25).

<sup>54</sup> Mikhail Naimy, *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun* (Beirut: Naufal, 1988), p.67. All subsequent references taken from the Naufal edition.

understand half of what I had read. Even if much of its meaning escaped me, the little I did read was enough to ignite a burning desire in my soul to go deeper in connecting myself with the Russian language and its literature.<sup>55</sup>

It is interesting that Naimy should have been so enraptured by Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* during his time in Nazareth. This novel was borne out of a tumultuous period in Russian history and culture,<sup>56</sup> when the vertical hierarchies of the state and church were being challenged by a period of heightened intellectual creativity sometimes referred to as the 'Golden Age.'<sup>57</sup> With regards to spiritual thought, many intellectuals in Russia were rejecting the positivism of the European Enlightenment and embraced the German romantic philosophical schools of Hegel and Schelling,<sup>58</sup> while Dostoevsky explored the realisation of faith beyond (but not excluding) the confined praxis of the church through characters such as Raskolnikov.

The second development was Naimy's growing interest in the Bible, particularly passages such as the Sermon on the Mount, which he considered 'to be the noblest and most exalted ever uttered by any tongue,'<sup>59</sup> and in all the excursions the seminary arranged to places of specific biblical

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<sup>55</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, pp.207-8.

<sup>56</sup> We should remark upon the fact that the Ottoman Empire, at the time of Naimy reading *Crime and Punishment*, was experiencing widespread reforms in education and law under the Hamidian regime (see Malcolm Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East 1792-1923* (London: Longman, 1987), pp. 179-95) of a scale and magnitude similar to 1860's Russia.

<sup>57</sup> Although the term often denotes the poetry of the 1820's and 30's, particularly the achievements of Lermontov and Pushkin, 'Golden Age' has also been used to refer to Russia's outstanding literary activity lasting until the 1880's. See Neil Cornwell (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.3.

<sup>58</sup> See Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (London: Penguin, 2008), pp.155-69.

<sup>59</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.187.

significance, such as the River Jordan, the Sea of Galilee and Mount Tabor.<sup>60</sup>

The religious importance of Nazareth was keenly felt by Naimy during his time at the seminary with an intense sensation of awe and inspiration that he records in his autobiography:

“You are living here – and in every known area of Palestine – in a world of charm and blessings. Wherever you walk and look, faces and events without number spring up before you from the distant past, all of which have penetrated into the core of your being. And the most beloved to you is the face of the true teacher and the story of His life. How short it was, that life! But time has not weakened that life, nor buried it and shrouded it in oblivion! Never forget, Mikhail, that here you are in the presence of Christ.<sup>61</sup>

The physical proximity of the spectre of Jesus brought about a yearning in Naimy to translate the teachings of Christ into praxis, a vital stage of theosis. Theosis, in its simplest English equivalence is defined as ‘deification,’ although commentators warn that ‘Christian monotheism goes against any literal “god making” of believers. Rather the NT speaks of a transformation of mind (the worshipper becomes a partaker of the divine nature)<sup>62</sup>, a metamorphosis of character, a redefinition of selfhood, and an imitation of God.’<sup>63</sup> While it should be pointed out that the theory pre-dates Christianity and that Plato ‘identified the highest aim of humanity as *eudaimonia* (to be

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<sup>60</sup> *Sab’ūn* I, p.187-8.

<sup>61</sup> *Sab’ūn* I, p.181.

<sup>62</sup> KJV, 2 Peter 1:4: ‘Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.’

<sup>63</sup> Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, *Theōsis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2006), p.1.

blessed with a good internal divinity,<sup>64</sup> we shall concentrate here on the Christian aspects of theosis for reasons that will become clear during the examination of Naimy's works.<sup>65</sup> Before that, he had to undergo purification and illumination, both of which he felt were attainable in Palestine, the same country in which Jesus had dwelled and taught. In recounting his activities in Nazareth, Naimy conveys a sense that he was, in the manner of Christ, undergoing torments to test his spiritual mettle, particularly in his decision to spend ten days in complete silence after he was insulted and abused by a class-mate:

The period of silence had ended. I lifted the reins from my tongue and went back to my previous ways with my classmates. However, I felt like I was returning from a long, long journey. I was myself – and not me, as if I had been born anew.<sup>66</sup>

Naimy's subsequent revelation that he could now 'see with eyes unlike those of the face'<sup>67</sup> imply a St Paul-like conversion at this point. Furthermore, his nephew Nadeem commentates on Naimy's 'big aspirations' and notable similarities to Jesus – a mother who taught him to pray at home and a father devoted to his work, family and God –that intimated Mikhail might grow up to achieve things far beyond that which his humble station may have suggested possible.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (eds.), *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2007), p.25.

<sup>65</sup> For more on the idea of theosis, see James R. Payton, *Light from the Christian East: An Introduction to the Orthodox Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2007) and Nancy J. Hudson, *Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2007).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.217.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Naimy, *op. cit.*, p.80.

At the end of his final year in Nazareth, Mikhail Naimy achieved the top grade, five, in every single one of his academic disciplines, aside from religious exercises, in which he scored a four and a half. Largely thanks to his inspirational Russian teacher, Anṭūn Ballān, who encouraged him to reach for the sky,<sup>69</sup> he was chosen to be the Nazareth Seminary's star pupil for the year and sent on a scholarship abroad. In September, 1906, he sailed to Poltava, Ukraine, to commence studying at the seminary.

### **Poltava Causes Naimy to Break with Orthodoxy**

Poltava allowed Naimy to consolidate many of his spiritual considerations as he struggled through four years of study at the seminary, his love for reading cruelly stemmed by a debilitating eye disease and his academic career curtailed by a venture into political activism that saw him lead a students' revolt against the teaching staff. In spite of these setbacks, Poltava was in a way the culmination of events that had begun in Nazareth – his affinity with the life of Jesus and his determination to carry out the praxis of what he considered to be true Christianity– as he suffered hardships of the mind and body in order to implement what he believed to be a sense of justice.

In the winter of 1909-10,<sup>70</sup> Naimy found upon entering the seminary classrooms that the students had decided to go on strike in protest against the teachers' restriction of their privileges. Naimy's words at the student demonstration, where he was asked by his comrades to speak on behalf of

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<sup>69</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.226.

<sup>70</sup> Naimy himself confesses that he is unable to remember the exact date in *Ab'ad min mūsū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.85.

them in spite of his reluctance, were particularly indicative of his Christian, Tolstoyan disposition, when, borrowing from the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke, he obliquely accused the school authorities of distorting the true message of Christianity:

I do not remember anything of what I said other than the following words: 'We ask for a loaf and they give us a stone. We ask for a fish and they give us a snake.' I took it from the teachings of Christ: 'Who amongst us when his son asks for a loaf gives him a stone? Or who gives a snake to he who asks for a fish?'<sup>71</sup>

In Poltava, Naimy found that he was able to merge the spiritualism, contemplation and Christian philosophy with the wealth of Russian literature that he saw and heard all around him. At the seminary, Naimy actively sought out the authors mentioned in conversations who formed the foundation of the cultural capital<sup>72</sup> of his classmates, such as Lermontov, whose evocation of nature in his poetry inspired Naimy to imitate him in his own verses. However, the reading lists for IOPS schools were conservative in nature<sup>73</sup> and Poltava was both provincial and conceptually distant from the urban, Modernist literary movement in St Petersburg. Consequently, Naimy's readings tended to revolve around the classical era of the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Ab'ad min mūsūkū wa min wāšintun*, pp.86-7. The corresponding passage appears in the King James version of the Bible in both Matthew 7:9-10 and Luke 11:11, the latter of which is quoted and also appears in *Ab'ad*: 'If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent?'

<sup>72</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, translated by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>73</sup> See Abu Hanna (2005).

<sup>74</sup> The reasons for this and the contrast with some of the readings of Russian literature evident in *al-Funūn* shall be explored throughout the thesis.

As mentioned above, however, Poltava, like much of the rest of Russia and 'Little Russia' at that time, still witnessed some subversive political activity despite the creation of the State Duma in 1906. As radicals looked to overhaul the seemingly unjust social status quo of the time and curtail Nicholas II's autocratic powers, Naimy almost inevitably found himself becoming a part of that movement. Once again, it would be a Russian writer who would express the adherence of the radical political agenda to the timeless morality of Christ's teaching and one to whom Naimy would be intellectually indebted his whole life, Tolstoy:

He would laugh to see me disputing great ideas from Tolstoy's canon. Forgive me, "Lev Nikolayevich." I am obliged to you for so many ideas that lit up what was obscure in my spiritual world. In many of your later publications which I read last year [1908], I found a light that would guide me in every step of my life ... Indeed. And you, in this respect, have become my teacher and guide without even knowing it.<sup>75</sup>

Tolstoy the teacher motivated Naimy to take the literary path he followed over the next several decades, publishing fiction and non-fiction that often attempted to bridge the chasm between socio-political events and religion. Naimy's reliance upon the Bible and Christianity for spiritual nourishment and inspiration is far more evidential in his writings than any other religion or religious text, even after his introduction to theosophy, and that this was as a result of the other major stimulus on his literary works: Russian literature as a body of works, including Tolstoy. Russian writers had formulated their own widely varying relationships with Christianity through decades of cultural

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<sup>75</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.282.

negotiation, to which Naimy both adhered and struggled with in his own literary pieces.

### ***The Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul: An Expression of Theosis***

Around four years before commencing writing *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, Naimy received his first copy of *al-Funūn* and found himself captivated by the writings of Kahlil Gibran.<sup>76</sup> This facet is important inasmuch as Gibran's writings demonstrated to Naimy another way through which to spiritual enlightenment outside of the strictures of organised religion.<sup>77</sup> Pitted Face's progression towards spiritual development is both reflective and expressive of a wider movement at the start of the twentieth century to seek a theistic wisdom in readings that did not adhere to established religious praxis.<sup>78</sup>

In terms of literary style, Naimy's novel *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* (The Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul) marks an interesting development in the history of modern Arabic literature;<sup>79</sup> its structure was innovative and indicative of how Naimy using his knowledge of Russian literature and experience of *mahjar* issues as a framework upon which to construct a radical new direction for Arabic prose

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<sup>76</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.35ff.

<sup>77</sup> Of the many works on Gibran available, I chose Naimy's own biography, *Ḳalīl Jibrān: ḥayātuhu, 'adabuhu, mawtuhu, funnuhu* (Beirut: Maktabah Ṣādir, 1943) for its (albeit partial) detail, and Ayman El-Desouky's *Kahlil Gibran: An Illustrated Anthology* (New York: Octopus, 2010) esp. ch.4 for its clear and concise comments on Gibran's feelings towards God, faith and religion. See also Ghassan Khalid, *Jibrān al-fīlsūf* (Beirut: Mu'assasah Naufal, 1974), Robin Waterfield, *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran* (London: Allen Lane, 1998) and Afifa Ghaith, *La pensée religieuse chez Ḡubrān Halīl Ḡubrān et Mihā'il Nu'ayma* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1990).

<sup>78</sup> For evidence of this I have turned once again to Naimy's biography of Kahlil Gibran and to a section of *Sab'ūn* II in which Naimy details some of the writers who were popular for their mysticism in the United States at the time, including Sri Aurobindo and George Gurdjieff (p.63).

<sup>79</sup> Scholarship on the novel, however, is scant and restricted to specialist works on Naimy, such as Nadeem and Nijland. One reason for this may be the novel's very delayed publication: although half the work was written before Naimy served for the U.S. Army in France in 1918 (*Sab'ūn* II, 108), the complete novel was not published until 1949 by Maktaba Ṣādir, Beirut (Nijland, 114).

literature in the form of the novel. *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* was one of Naimy's earliest published works, serialised in the literary journal *al-Funūn* from October, 1917 (vol.3, no.3) to June, 1918 (vol.3, no.6), and tells the story of a man who has committed a crime that has caused him to flee his home country. For the purposes of this chapter, however, it will be essential to look more deeply at the aspects of spirituality and spiritual experience in the novel and how this bears traces of his readings of Russian literature.

As with so many of his short stories, especially if one thinks of the collections *Kān ma kān* (Once Upon a Time, 1937) and *Akābir* (Bigshots, 1956), the characters populating the story are Lebanese migrants meeting and chatting in an Arab café in New York (the same setting that plays a crucial role in *Sa'ādat "al-bēg"* (His Excellency the Bey)). A chance encounter between a customer and the owner of the café, who continually cries out, 'What a pity for you, Pitted Face!'<sup>80</sup> leads to the customer enquiring of the identity of the man that the owner is lamenting. The owner explains that Pitted Face was an extremely intelligent waiter who had been working at the café, but who had suddenly and mysteriously disappeared. His final exit from the café was as bizarre as his unexpected first appearance, when he turned up, half-naked and sodden from the rain, at the café and the owner, without hearing a word emanating from him, gave him a job as a waiter. For the three years he had worked there, Pitted Face had never spoken a word to anyone, hence giving no indication of his history or origins, but had left behind a diary in a wooden box at the back of the café.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* (from *al-Majmū'ah al-kāmilah* (8 vols.), 4<sup>th</sup> vol., Beirut: Dār al-'ilm li-l-mulayin, 1971), p.343. All subsequent references taken from the Dār al-'ilm li-l-mulayin edition.

<sup>81</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.344.

In a somewhat implausible turn of the narrative, the narrator-customer of the enveloping introductory story asks the owner if he may take the pad home with him.<sup>82</sup> The owner, who (conveniently) is illiterate, does not object, declaring that there is nothing he will find of value of in the memoirs regarding Pitted Face's life.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, once the narrator-customer starts to read the memoirs the narrative shifts from the enveloping story to the enveloped bulk of the novel: the story of how Pitted Face came to turn up in New York in such a bedraggled state. Consequently, the narrator becomes Pitted Face and the text takes the form of diary entries, forming the story of Pitted Face and building up a character picture of a complex personality.

What was so bold and striking about the form of *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* was that Naimy made no attempt to frame Pitted Face's emerging character in a typical chronological sequence of the kind that one would expect from biographies. Instead, Naimy was allowing Pitted Face's character to develop itself through a narrative that was as much a philosophical treatise as it was an enveloped story. From the beginning, Pitted Face wants to digest and critique his surroundings, especially the people who surround him, as much as he wants to tell his story:

I am a pious man amongst the people. Being pious amongst the people all around him is piety amongst the brutes. You can take the side of the brute and win its confidence in kindness and love. But if it goes wrong and you anger the brute, he will rip your body apart. The people consider kindness and love to be your weakness, and they will

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<sup>82</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.346.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* (The reader may wonder at this point how the owner could possibly know this.)

refrain from causing less harm to your mortal body because they are fearful of natural laws.<sup>84</sup>

Another remarkable thing about the character development of Pitted Face is that Naimy saw the value in the memoirs as an intimate portrayal of his life as he saw it. Everything in the entries was valuable towards understanding who Pitted Face was, even when the diary entries appeared to say very little. Some diary entries merely record the day, followed by a single word: *sukūt* (silence).<sup>85</sup> The fact that he says nothing, writes nothing, is not a sign of laziness, but of a need to step out of the world and into silent contemplation, a place where he can become closer to the godhead that is the ultimate goal of the process of theosis.

### **Naimy's Spiritual Reading of *Crime and Punishment***

Before we even get to see the contents of the memoirs, however, we read that the pad has been inscribed with an intriguing epigram: *min nafsi ila nafsi* (from myself to myself).<sup>86</sup> As Pitted Face has no other audience with whom to interact, his own self becomes his audience. Instantly, we can see the traces of Russian literary works upon which Naimy had relied so heavily in the years leading up to this novel. Chief amongst these is *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (Crime and Punishment), whose main protagonist, as mentioned above, is Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov – the last part of his name referring not only

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<sup>84</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.349.

<sup>85</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.355 is an early example of this where three consecutive days (Sunday, Monday, Tuesday) are followed by the word 'silence.'

<sup>86</sup> Nadeem Naimy, op. cit., p.165. Nadeem uses the 2<sup>nd</sup> Beirut edition, which appears to have a slightly different text. In the *Dār al-'ilm li-l-mulayin* version (p.346), the 'simple notebook' is inscribed with the Arabic for 'my memoirs.' Furthermore, the newspaper that Nadeem asserts is Spanish is described in the collected works version as 'foreign.'

to the schismatics, who represented the old, pre-reform, Orthodox Christians in Russia, but also to the word for 'split' in Russian (*raskol*) and thus demonstrating how the main character is torn between a divine and earthly struggle: between a human being with a conscience and thus with limitations, and a kind of superhuman who has transcended good and evil to become more like the godhead. *Crime and Punishment* was written at a time (1865)<sup>87</sup> of personal financial turmoil for Dostoevsky and a very unsettled socio-political environment in St Petersburg: intellectual notions that seemed to support Raskolnikov's actions, such as English Utilitarianism and Napoleonism,<sup>88</sup> were popular and heightening political agitation over the effects of the Emancipation of the Serfs Act in 1863 greatly contributed to the first assassination attempt on Tsar Alexander II's life in 1866, the same year as its publication in *Russkii vestnik* (The Russian Messenger).<sup>89</sup>

The circumstances for Naimy's writing of *Muḏakkirāt al-'arqaš* also suffered from political instability in the form of the First World War and, as we can also see in the parallelisms with the prophetic Jibrān, there is certainly a strong hint towards Saint-Simon's 'New Jerusalem' (referred to by Raskolnikov) present in the doctrines of Pitted Face.<sup>90</sup> However, it is Naimy's receptive reading in the main character of *Muḏakkirāt al-'arqaš* that we shall consider

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<sup>87</sup> The novel could have been called 'The Year 1865,' according to Leonid Grossman (*Dostoevsky* (Moscow: Molodaya gvardiya, 1963), p.351), such was its strong relation to current events.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Peace notes that Napoleon III's *The History of Julius Caesar* 'caused quite a stir in St Petersburg,' (*Dostoevsky: An Examination of the Major Novels* (Cambridge: CUP, 1971), p.24) for its division of humanity into 'ordinary people' and 'heroes.'

<sup>89</sup> Derek Offord's essay, 'Crime and Punishment and Contemporary Radical Thought,' from *Fyodor Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Peace (Oxford: OUP, 2006), pp. 119-148, is also very informative on this subject.

<sup>90</sup> See Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Jessie Coulson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.251 and 533n. and also Frank E. Manuel, *The Prophets of Paris* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp.103-48.

first here. From the epigram onwards, the reader is aware that Pitted Face is a character who represents a tension within himself. There are two sides to Pitted Face that the memoirs will strive to accommodate and reconcile. The memoirs demonstrate the horror that Pitted Face sees in the mirror, not only physically (he describes his face as being 'like a piece of wood bored out by worms'<sup>91</sup>), but when he considers his own personality, even when he has done something generous like visiting Sannaharib in hospital, he can perceive only an ugly apparition:

Tuesday

I am ashamed of myself! I lied when I wrote all that yesterday.

There's no doubt that I sympathise with Sannaharib and I pity him. But I did not go to visit him just to offer nothing but sympathy and pity.

However, it pleases me that I can discover something about his affairs.

Guard your pen like you guard your mouth, O Pitted Face. And guard yourself from both of them. Then guard yourself from yourself.<sup>92</sup>

From the point of view of the reader, the narrative is highly problematised by this diary entry of Pitted Face as we are told by the protagonist that we effectively are unable to trust everything that he writes. That, along with the single word silences of certain diary entries, is part of the plot as we have to understand Pitted Face's split. As he tells us himself in another diary entry:

I am, then, two Pitted Faces in one: one has withdrawn from civilised circles and wrapped himself up in silence so that he may reach and move about in a higher world; the other has veiled himself off from

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<sup>91</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.351 is the first instance of this phrase, but it is repeated throughout the work.

<sup>92</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.375.

human concerns with a curtain, and he is now trying to tear apart the curtain so that he may re-enter the human realm.<sup>93</sup>

Why does Pitted Face feel this way, that he is adrift from the rest of human civilisation in the same way that Raskolnikov and Smerdyakov (from *Brat'ya Karamazovi* (The Brothers Karamazov)) find themselves unable to interact with people in a civilised manner? For the answer to that question, we must jump to the end of the novel and the denouement. As Nadeem Naimy quotes in his work on Naimy, one of Tolstoy's aphorisms (itself cited in Gorky's *Literaturnie portreti*) provides a clue:

“A man,” Tolstoy is reported to have told Gorky on one occasion, “goes through earthquakes, epidemics, the horrors of disease, and all sorts of spiritual torments, but the most agonising tragedy he ever knows has been and will always be – the tragedy of the bedroom.” It is only in the light of this so-called tragedy of the bedroom that the plot of *The Memoirs of Pitted Face* can best be appreciated. In as far as human life is concerned, love, in broad terms, is perhaps the greatest witness to man's feeling of his individual insufficiency.<sup>94</sup>

Pitted Face believes that the strongest sense of human fulfilment is to be found in Platonic love. Taken in Diotima's definition in Plato's *The Symposium*, Platonic love ascends from earthly desires through the appreciation of beauty towards contemplation of the divine. Sex debases this spiritual aspect of Platonic love and thus pollutes the communion with the godhead. Pitted Face falls in love with his bride, but is plagued by the fact that his body craves

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<sup>93</sup> *Muḡakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.391.

<sup>94</sup> Nadeem Naimy, op. cit., p.172. The Tolstoy quotation comes from Gorky's *Literaturnie portreti* (*Literary Portraits*) (Moscow: «Molodaya gvardiya,» 1963), p.131.

earthly, physical, sexual love. In order to preserve his spiritual aspirations and stifle his earthly lust, therefore, he murders his bride on their wedding night, flees Argentina where they had been wed, and, significantly, falls completely silent – his thoughts only registering on the pages of the memoirs he is now writing.<sup>95</sup>

Falling silent is significant for Pitted Face because it is in keeping with the Russian literary characters whose influence he bears. Talīdah, in *Ayyūb*, and Pitted Face are united by moments when the senses do not function as they would normally be expected to and the clarity that these moments bring. These occasions allow the characters to ascend to a higher plane of existence, closer to knowing the universal oneness of the godhead, and also remind us of Naimy's actions in Nazareth. Pitted Face's prolonged absence of speech allows him to record his thoughts in his memoirs and in doing so, bring himself closer to the divinity that he had wanted to achieve through his Platonic love with his wife.

The significance of silence for Naimy can be detected in his reading of *The Brothers Karamazov*, a novel to which Naimy referred in his collection, *Fi al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*. Smerdyakov, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, is another epileptic character who also distinguishes himself from the rest of the community by being sullen and morose, rarely speaking to anyone but Ivan Karamazov, with whom he shares many religious ideas. Significantly, he is also the son of a mute woman – and rumoured to be the illegitimate son of Fyodor Karamazov, something that is never explicitly said. Dostoevsky's last novel was produced

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<sup>95</sup> It is worth noting at this point that Naimy himself was haunted by the 'tragedy of the bedroom.' The Poltava part of *Sab'ūn I* features heavily his love affair with a Russian woman, Varia. The love affair was doomed to failure for the same reason: that Naimy wanted the relationship to be Platonic, but his desire for sexual love was threatening to destroy the spiritual element. He therefore had to commit his own type of 'murder' by leaving Varia, and indeed Russia, and fleeing to Walla Walla in Washington state.

in a social climate as politically unstable as that which conceived *Crime and Punishment*, with Tsar Alexander II being assassinated the year after publication, and one of its main strengths lies in its convincing portrayal of *pravedniki* (righteous persons) who uphold moral virtues and fortitude in such a turbulent atmosphere.<sup>96</sup> Naimy's reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* resulted in the creation of a protagonist who took aspects of his personality from a variety of Dostoevskyan characters. Not only do Smerdyakov and Pitted Face share the spiritual aspect of inner conflict, spiritual aspirations towards the godhead and physical repulsion from the people around them, but also the figurative feature of their characters being linked with silence.

### **The Spiritual Significance of Pitted Face's Two Sides**

Naimy chose to portray Pitted Face as an ex-student, echoing the position of Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. As to his current occupation, his employment as a waiter in a Lebanese café is simply a means of giving him accommodation and saving him from eking out a beggar's existence on the streets. His position mirrors Naimy's at the time of writing, as he struggled to make a decent wage purely from his writing, he was forced to seek gainful employment at the Bethlehem Steel Company and felt himself oddly displaced from his true profession while doing so.<sup>97</sup> Pitted Face is a brilliant mind, a superb ex-student and a man who is totally wrapped up in his own ideas about life and death, the world and God. Right from the start of the

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<sup>96</sup> As pointed out by Caryl Emerson in *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2008) Sonya Marmeladova in *Crime and Punishment* is also a *pravednitsa* (the female equivalent).

<sup>97</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.100.

novel, there is no human, moral code interrupting his daily existence. The act of charity bestowed upon him by the owner of the café (who probably saves him from an early death from exposure or pneumonia) is not greeted with profuse thanks or even hostile dismissal, just neutrally – as if the acts of the ‘ordinary folk’ are governed by laws that do not apply to such persons as

Pitted Face:

“He [Pitted Face] worked here for three years. Three years in full. He came to me on a day much like this one, half naked, nothing covering his head and the rain pouring out over my legs from every piece of clothing on his body. I said: what do you want, my son? He said: can you give me a job in your place? I said to myself: it’s a good deed in the eyes of God and I need a waiter, so let him work that we might see whether he’s good or bad. I said: will you work just for your keep? He nodded his head in agreement.<sup>98</sup>

Aside from answers of ‘I don’t know’ to questions concerning his name, the name of his father, where he comes from and how old he is, this is the only time we hear Pitted Face say anything. Pitted Face’s ability to keep his silence does not just come from the mental shock that has resulted from the murder of his bride, but also arises out of an understanding of Raskolnikov’s theory of ordinary and extraordinary people in *Crime and Punishment*, and the theory of theosis: Pitted Face is striving to become god and so will not deign to answer banal questions. Pitted Face also symbolises the supremacy of the

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<sup>98</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-’arqaš*, p.344.

artist in society – a theory that owes a great deal to Russian literary criticism, and especially to Belinsky.<sup>99</sup>

In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov bludgeons the old pawnbroker and her sister with an axe in order to steal the money that he will put towards saving his family and funding his studies. As a vital step in his ‘extraordinary man’ theory, Raskolnikov is several strata above the ordinary folk and therefore is permitted, like his ‘extraordinary’ predecessors Muḥammad and Napoleon, to commit acts for the good of civilisation that would be beyond the vast majority of people.

‘I simply intimate that the “extraordinary” man has the right ... I don’t mean a formal, official right, but he has the right in himself, to permit his conscience to overstep ... certain obstacles, but only in the event that his ideas (which may sometimes be salutary for all mankind) require it for their fulfilment. [...] [T]he law-givers and regulators of human society, beginning with the most ancient, and going on to Lycurgus, Solon, Mahomet, Napoleon and so on, were without exception transgressors, by the very fact that in making a new law they *ipso facto* broke an old one.’<sup>100</sup>

Ineluctably associated for modern readers with the later Nietzschean idea of the superman,<sup>101</sup> Raskolnikov himself believes that ‘extraordinary’ people like himself are allowed to transgress (the Russian word for ‘crime’ in the title, *prestuplenie*, originates from the verb *prestupit’*, which may be translated as

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<sup>99</sup> Belinsky’s critical essay on the role and (self-aggrandising) privilege of the artist is examined in the criticism chapter, as well as Naimy’s response to it.

<sup>100</sup> *Crime and Punishment* (1995), p.249.

<sup>101</sup> Harold Bloom (ed.), *Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 2004).

'to transgress') simply on account of their extraordinariness and the premise that the eventual beneficial results would outweigh the misery caused by the original deed. In fact, Raskolnikov thinks that extraordinary people are not just allowed to transgress the boundaries put up by laws for the populace, but positively have a duty to transgress the limits and bring humanity to its highest possible capacity.<sup>102</sup>

Seen in this light, Raskolnikov does not look upon his actions as being essentially 'evil.' Two other characters in the novel illustrate the twin poles of human moral behaviour: Sofia Semyonovna Marmeladova is a character wholly committed to the carrying out of good acts, while Arkady Ivanovich Svidrigailov represents the more depraved end of the human morality spectrum, as he seemingly enjoys the misery he heaps upon people. Traditionally, we could look upon these characters as defining the more typically Christian notions of good and evil, respectively. Raskolnikov, meanwhile, wavers between the two poles, carrying out his life without the self-censoring instrument that is a human conscience. His murder of the pawnbroker, Alyona Ivanovna, is performed coolly and disinterestedly (in contrast to the second murder, which is executed in a state of panic, triggered by the sudden uprush of his basic human emotions). Raskolnikov's rational extremism results in his being able to dispatch of the pawnbroker without fear or conscience that would be the inevitable consequence of somebody who knew they had perpetrated an evil act. As Raskolnikov thinks, with the icy detachment of a nihilist, the money that belongs to Ivanovna needs to be in his hands – how the transferral is made is irrelevant.

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<sup>102</sup> *Crime and Punishment*, pp.250-1.

Comparably, Pitted Face is not just an extraordinary person, he also has a view of humanity and the cosmos that places him in a position to transcend towards the godhead and as such he rises above the daily routines of ordinary people.

People need names in order to write down their simple-minded histories and to direct their petit courts and governments. They organise the links between themselves and each other, so that they know that that house is Ahmad's and that garden belongs to Paul. That doesn't work for me – for I am Pitted Face – to pluck an onion out to still my hunger, or to take refuge in one of the many corners of that house when the storms begin to howl and the snow cascades down. I am still in the street with my teeth chattering from the cold. There is neither retreat nor refuge for me.<sup>103</sup>

Pitted Face asks for nothing, but is not grateful for what he receives. In a reference to the Islamic religion that is inseparably associated with the Arabic language, Naimy significantly describes Pitted Face's partitioned space at the back of the café as a *zāwiyah*,<sup>104</sup> invoking images of the traditional *zāwiyah* that is a small prayer room in a mosque and so continuing the theme of Pitted Face as a venerated religious figure. The *zāwiyah* suits Pitted Face's immediate needs, but we can presume that it would make no difference to his state of mind were he to be housed in a palace. The murder has been committed. It was not an act of either good or evil, but was just something that was necessary in order to pursue the path towards divinity – something that

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<sup>103</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.352.

<sup>104</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.345 passim.

extraordinary people sometimes need to carry out for the eventual (spiritual) good of all involved.

### **The Nature of Evil in *Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul***

In spite of the tendencies towards divinity in both Pitted Face and Raskolnikov, the manifestly human nature of their actions is transmitted to the reader through their actions. For Dostoevsky, as for Naimy, the idea of pure evil is a misnomer for their characters because of their impassioned belief in the teachings of Jesus and the potentiality for redemption that exists within all of us. This idea may well have occurred to Naimy very early on in his schooling, possibly while he was studying at Nazareth and was consumed by the idea of Jesus as a man and teacher, but was cemented by his reading of Russian literature. In *Sab'ūn*, Naimy writes of his reading of Lermontov and of how he was particularly enthralled by his long poem *Dyemon* (The Demon) and the tropes that Lermontov utilises in his verses:

Two days ago I returned Lermontov to the library. O God, How many feelings this poet moved inside me! How many remnants of thoughts and dreams! And because I could not find another work by him in the library, I preferred to return without taking out any other book at all.<sup>105</sup>

This poem, which occupied Lermontov's life and which he treated to eight redactions, concerns the appearance on earth of a demon who has been cast out of heaven, falls to earth and falls in love with a human woman, only to kill her at the end with a fatal kiss. In his depiction of the demon, Lermontov aims

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<sup>105</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, pp.273-4.

to create a figure who seems to be purely evil. So evil is he, in fact, that he does not even enjoy the act of committing evil acts. The results of his evil doings are indifferent to him. However, as the long poem continues and the demon sees the possibility of feeling human affection as he closes in on the human woman, Tamara, with whom he seems to have fallen in love, there is a crack in the otherwise opaque, impenetrable defence against notions of good and evil that are built upon Christian teachings:

The Demon's attenuated or even negated demonism comes through unmistakably toward the end of his tale. Once smitten by love for the beautiful Tamara, he approaches her "with a spirit open to good", and he readily agrees when she asks him to forsake his "evil enterprises". Beyond that, he tells her that he actually longs to renounce evil and return to his original angelic condition, assuring her, "I want to be reconciled with heaven, / I want to love, I want to pray, / I want to believe in good".<sup>106</sup>

Like much of Naimy's work, Lermontov created this poem as an intellectual encounter between East and West, even adding the epitaph 'An Oriental Tale' to its title.<sup>107</sup> Lermontov's perception of the 'Orient' (in this case, the Caucasus) was strongly directed by the 'scientific' approach to the East Russian academia adopted in tandem with the growth of national, expansionist interests in the area.<sup>108</sup> Russian imaginings of the Orient were unaware of the

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<sup>106</sup> Elizabeth Cheresch Allen, *A Fallen Idol is Still a God* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), p.95.

<sup>107</sup> The East in Lermontov's imagining, however, referred to the Caucasus rather than the Arab world.

<sup>108</sup> See Peter Scotto, 'Prisoners of the Caucasus: Ideologies of Imperialism in Lermontov's "Bela",' (PMLA, Vol.107, No.2, Mar., 1992) pp.246-60.

history of the region and believed it to be culturally a blank space.<sup>109</sup> In the poem, East is used as a trope to signify the space where chaos annuls any sense of order (much like the seas in Sindbad's tales)<sup>110</sup> and which is significantly distant from civilisation for magical happenings to occur. Although geographically removed from western civilisation, the characters are still bounded by the moral codes of Russian society and are guided by the basic tenets of Orthodox Christianity that will seek God eventually, irrespective of their former deeds. The chance of salvation lies within even the most wicked characters because pure evil without any capacity for goodness is not possible of any human character and not possible, it would seem, even of a supernatural demon, such as Satan.

### **The Idea of Salvation for Pitted Face**

We must end this study of *Muḏakkirāt al-'arqaš* with the observation that all of the characters we have considered, Pitted Face, Raskolnikov, Lermontov's Demon, share similar experiences regarding the potentiality of salvation that either negates or complicates the role of an exterior church. Looking more deeply at other characters that Naimy directly or indirectly wrote about, Dmitri Karamazov, Satin (from Gorky's play *Na dne* (The Lower Depths))<sup>111</sup>, and in

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid. The Caucasus in Russian cultural imagining, and especially in Lermontov's imagining is an interesting subject. David Powelstock (*Becoming Mikhail Lermontov: The Ironies of Romantic Individualism in Nicholas I's Russia* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005) emphasises its edenic qualities as a 'lost paradise' (p.28), but also the danger the exotic land posed as a place of exile. Elena Khaetskaya (*Lermontov* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo «Veche», 2011)) also underscores the Caucasus' 'otherness.' The complex relationship between East and West is also explored in detail in Yu. M. Lotman's essay '«Fatalist» i problema Vostoka i Zapada v tvorchestve Lermontova' from *O russkoi literature: stat'i i issledovaniya (1958-1993)* (St Petersburg: «Iskusstvo-SPB», 1997).

<sup>110</sup> For a study on the use of the sea as a metaphor for dystopia in *Alf laylah wa laylah*, see Wen-chin Ouyang, *Utopian Fantasy or Dystopian Nightmare: Trajectories of Desire in Classical Arabic and Chinese Fiction* (eprints.soas.ac.uk, 2008).

<sup>111</sup> See the essay *Gorky* in Naimy's collection *Fi al-ḡirbāl al-jadīd*.

a more oblique way Smerdyakov, we notice that the capacity for seeking salvation is a personal issue that can take place without interference from the Christian church. Both Pitted Face and Raskolnikov have their human promoters of salvation who push them in the direction of submission to God (Sofya in Raskolnikov's case, Sannaharib in Pitted Face's) and who serve to remind the protagonists of their earthly bondage and of their inability to achieve the divinity that they strove towards. Yet, while Sofya speaks with a recognisably Orthodox Christian world-view, Sannaharib is evidently more religiously imprecise and mystical in his dialogue:

Why does Sannaharib want me to write my will? What difference does it make whether I write my will or not? Is he perhaps a prophet warning me of the imminence of my appointed hour?<sup>112</sup>

That there should be no interaction of the church should not surprise us and is fully in keeping with Naimy's reading of Russian literature, especially the two writers to whom he felt the largest debt during the course of his career: Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, both of whom wrote brilliant excoriating rebukes against aspects of organised Christianity.<sup>113</sup> Tolstoy's reasons for his opposition to the Christian church, which were developed over the course of a long writing career,<sup>114</sup> were largely based on its refusal to accept the non-

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<sup>112</sup> *Muḏakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.379.

<sup>113</sup> Tolstoy was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901, two years after the publication of his last novel, *Voskresenie* (Resurrection, 1899), which was an outspoken attack on establishment institutions in Russia, including the church (see Michael Holman's essay, 'The Sanification of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*' in Karl Simms (ed.), *Translating Sensitive Texts: Linguistic Aspects* (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1997)). Dostoevsky, on the other hand, famously attacked the Catholic Church through the character of the Grand Inquisitor while acknowledging the positive impact of the Orthodox tradition of *starchestvo* (spiritual elders) in Russian culture through the character of Father Zosima (Sarah Hudspith, *Dostoevsky and the Idea of Russianness: A New Perspective on Unity and Brotherhood* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p.141ff.).

<sup>114</sup> Further explored by G. W. Spence in *Tolstoy the Ascetic* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1967).

violent creed that formed the basis of Jesus' teachings<sup>115</sup> and his subsequent conclusion that 'the dogmas of all the churches were harmful nonsense.'<sup>116</sup> Like Dostoevsky, he believed that a person's will to believe in the Gospels had to come from within themselves and not from the pulpit in a formulaic, and often hypocritical, homily.

If all men were to learn that the Church professes to believe in a Christ of punishment and warfare, not of forgiveness, no one would believe in the Church and it could not prove to anyone what it is trying to prove.<sup>117</sup>

Early on in his Poltava studentship, Naimy had read and understood this vital aspect of Tolstoy's teachings, that true Christianity was to be found within one's heart, when one had repudiated violence, comprehended the brotherhood of humankind and recognised the true beauty of God's creation, and would not come from the decorative architecture or solemn paeans that were seen and heard in church. This opposition to the church acting as a hegemonic political institution would remain with Naimy throughout his life.<sup>118</sup> His character, Pitted Face, reflects all that he had understood about God and Jesus through Tolstoy's writing: that the chance for salvation exists within all of us, that love of God is more spiritually fulfilling than carnal, animal love, that true religion and devotion to God and Jesus' teachings has to come from a place inside oneself rather than from the church. Of course, Pitted Face's

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<sup>115</sup> G. M. Hamburg, 'Tolstoy's Spirituality' (from Donna Tussing Orwin (ed.), *Anniversary Essays on Tolstoy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010)).

<sup>116</sup> Spence (1967), p.79.

<sup>117</sup> Lev Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (London: Walter Scott, 1894), p.48.

<sup>118</sup> Opposition to the established church is a potent thread in Lebanese literary history: Farisal al-Shidyaq (1804-87) wrote religious criticism and had been strongly affected by the torture and murder of his brother by a Maronite patriarch on account of his alleged apostasy.

thoughts can be random and unconnected, but they emanate from a character whose mind is trying to unite the thoughts of Dostoevsky on theosis and Tolstoy on the Gospels, aggravating the possibility of mental conflict. For the purposes of this study, we can see similar evidence of the ‘hermeneutics of question and answer’ Jauss described in his dissection of Goethe’s and Valéry’s *Faust* that are brought into a dialogical relationship when the critic recognises that Naimy sought to answer questions that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky had left behind.<sup>119</sup> (Further unravelling and more lucid expression of these thoughts and connections took place in Naimy’s novel, *Mirdād*, considered by at least one critic to be a sort of sequel to *Muḍakkirāt al-’arqaš*.<sup>120</sup>)

### **Naimy’s Exploration of Spirituality in the Intellectual Essays**

Exploration into individual spirituality using aspects of a variety of different religions was prevalent at the time of Naimy’s residence in New York, in no small part thanks to Kahlil Gibran, but also due to the continued popularity of the writings of similarly transcendentalist thinkers such as William James and Ralph Waldo Emerson (about whom Naimy wrote an essay in *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*)<sup>121</sup>, who argued against the state of modern culture and for the centrality of God and divinity in daily life. Naimy’s intellectual essays form part of this tradition.

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<sup>119</sup> Jauss (1982), pp.110-38, esp. p.113. In this sense, *Muḍakkirāt al-’arqaš* also relates to the Russian works mentioned as *tessera* (see Jauss, p.135 and Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), pp.49-76 (‘*Tessera* or Completion and Antithesis’)).

<sup>120</sup> Aida Imangulieva, *Jibrān, Rihani & Naimy* (Oxford: Inner Farne, 2009), p.150.

<sup>121</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, pp.118-24.

The term 'intellectual essays' refers to a number of collections of articles written by Naimy throughout his long life, and published in a variety of journals and newspapers before being collated into single editions. Although many of these collections encompassed variegated areas of human life, from socio-economic commentaries on the East-West political divide to spiritual allegories of the human soul, it is my contention that they are pulled together by a common strand of Christian thought that appeals to the moral convictions of both author and reader, a point expressed by Hussein Dabbagh:

The keynote in Mikhail Naimy's personality and thought is his deep religious sense [...] he seemed ultimately to reject the established teachings of the Church, while clinging to the example of Christ and his sublime teachings.<sup>122</sup>

That Naimy rejected the Orthodox Christian Church but embraced the teachings of Christ (like both Jibrān and Rīhānī who had also jettisoned organised religion in favour of exploring spirituality in its wider sense) is a recurring theme throughout many of his works and is in evidence in the collections where the Christian message of peace and understanding is most relevant and apparent: namely, *al-Marāḥil* (The Stages, 1933), *Zād al-mī'ād* (Provisions for the Appointed Hour, 1936), *al-Bayādir* (The Threshing Floors, 1945), *Ṣaut al-'ālam* (The Voice of the World, 1948), *an-Nūr wa-d-daijūr* (Light and Darkness, 1950) and *Fī mahabb ar-rīḥ* (Exposed to the Wind, 1953).<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Hussein Dabbagh, *Mikhail Naimy: some aspects of his thought as revealed in his writings* (Durham: Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1983), p.46.

<sup>123</sup> In this respect, Naimy shares a great deal of his spiritual outlook, one that explores the idea of godliness within humankind, with Jibrān, whose works reveal a dialogic process with Blake. In spite of their shared commitment to the potentiality of humans for godliness, Naimy, Blake and Gibran all relied heavily upon biblical imagery and Christian teachings in their work, as shall be examined later (see Naimy's biography of Jibrān, *Kalīl Jibrān: a biography* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1985) and Eugene Paul Nassar and Khalil Gibran, 'Cultural Discontinuity in the Works of Kahlil Gibran' (MELUS, Vol.7, No.2, Summer, 1980), pp.21-36.

These essays most accurately reflect the way in which Naimy's intellect had been shaped by myriad influences throughout his life: highly significant traces of theosophic thinking, which incorporated elements of Buddhist and Taoist religions, constantly underpinned by the teachings and writings of Christ and Tolstoy, the latter of whom had also embraced eastern religions in his intellectual essays.<sup>124</sup> They are also, of course, explorations into the religious philosophy of theosophy, in which Naimy had become interested after a chance meeting with a Scottish student in Walla Walla.<sup>125</sup> Amongst the tenets of theosophy were the promotion of a universal brotherhood, irrespective of race or creed, and the study of comparative religion and philosophy, with the belief that certain beneficial aspects could be adopted from a number of different faiths.

### **Naimy's Dissatisfaction with the USA and his Resulting Concentration on Spirituality**

Naimy's first collection, *al-Marāḥil*, was published in 1933, a year after he had left New York for the last time and headed back to Baskinta, Lebanon. The reasons for his departure were numerous, the increasing lack of publishing opportunities for Arabic literature in New York, the discontinuation of *al-Funūn* and, possibly most importantly of all considering that Naimy

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<sup>124</sup> Tolstoy's essay *Shto takoe religiya i v chom sushnost' yeyo?* (What is Religion and of What Does Its Essence Exist?) is a typical example of this as, on p.88, he cites Brahminism and Buddhism in his reasoning (trans. Jane Kentish, London: Penguin, 1987). However, it should be acknowledged, as G. M. Hamburg points out in 'Tolstoy's Spirituality,' that in other works (such as *Khristianskoe uchenie* (Christian Teaching)) Tolstoy criticises other religions for 'permit[ting] exceptions to the law of love,' and in the same work even brands Islam with the accusation of 'falsity.'

<sup>125</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.57.

dedicated such effort to writing his biography,<sup>126</sup> the fact that his friend and collaborator *Ḳalīl Jibrān* had died in 1931. Nevertheless, for a long time, Naimy had been eager to leave a place where the environment, the maelstrom of noise, money, bustle and all the other trappings of modern society that New York encapsulated, clashed with all the spiritual factors that Naimy felt necessary in his life.

I came to America with everything in me speaking loud against American materialism, or what seemed to me sordid American materialism. Continuous hustle and bustle and rush for money – and for what? It seemed to me the whole thing was false and empty...

Is it hard for you now to picture some of the feelings that have been mine all this time? The hardest of them is the feeling of being misplaced, of being out of my element, a misfit, so to speak, and in not being able to extricate myself gracefully and definitely. (From a letter by Naimy in New York to his two brothers in Walla Walla, dated June 9, 1925.)<sup>127</sup>

Out of this disaffection with American culture that he saw as elevating the pursuit of money above all other human considerations,<sup>128</sup> Naimy sought a lifestyle that not only would provide more spiritual nourishment through a concentrated contemplation of the natural world around him, but would not press against his vision any evident signs of a society that worshipped the attainment of money above all other considerations. Like Naimy, Tolstoy also had taken the decision to extricate himself from the chaotic environment of the

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<sup>126</sup> It must be stated, however, that evidence from both Naimy's *Ḳalīl Jibrān* and *Sab'ūn II* testify to the fact that Naimy felt very close to many members of the Syro-American circle, including Nasīb 'Arīḏa and Rašid Ayyūb.

<sup>127</sup> Naimy, op. cit., p.158.

<sup>128</sup> See *Ṣannīn wa-d-dūlār*, from Naimy's collection *Zād al-mī'ād*, in which the author compares the environments and cultures of Baskinta and New York.

army and aristocratic St Petersburg and Moscow, and ensconce himself in his verdant family estate at Yasnaya Polyana. Although the means by which Tolstoy arrived at his own hermitage after taking such an active part in busy, urban, social life were fundamentally different to Naimy – Tolstoy was initially dedicating himself to family life as a kind of catharsis process, while Naimy was protecting himself and his literary works from the corrosive aspects of capitalist culture – there are clear and obvious parallels both between their transformations from social animal to recluse, in both cases underpinned by a radical interpretation of the teachings of Jesus.

Taking a Bakhtinian critical approach (by which, we should remind ourselves, I mean the prioritisation of context over text in the form of the ‘heteroglossia’ concept and the simultaneous presence of many voices in a work or utterance<sup>129</sup>) to the first work in our selection, *al-Marāḥil*, whereby the essays are the product of a great many social factors and voices present in the narrative, we can see that Naimy’s writings bear the traces of his religious education and the myriad influences that affected him during his time in Nazareth and Poltava – none more so than maybe the two greatest influences on his life and literature: Jesus Christ and Leo Tolstoy.

The first essays of *al-Marāḥil* form a triptych: three religious faces depicted in three essays, Buddha, Lao Tze and Jesus; the lengthiest and seemingly most personally written of which is the portrait of Jesus. Jesus is not represented as a miracle-worker or as a heavenly figure who is out of reach to

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<sup>129</sup> See especially M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; ed. Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004) and *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee; ed. Emerson and Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2006).

normal, earthly beings, but as a simple man.<sup>130</sup> As Naimy imagines witnessing the crucifixion of Jesus, he admires the great patience shown by Jesus as he endures and forgives the people who spit on and humiliate him as he put to death on the cross:

Even as my pains and hopes, my torments and anxieties, assault me, and my way is closed in by the faces of people, in every one of whom I see the reflection of my own face, in my heart I love that I am raising upon high a cross, even that I nail you to that cross. And that I wait for your face to rise in the light of 'The Kingdom' when you open your lips and proclaim to your father, 'Commend my soul to thy hands.'<sup>131</sup>

Choosing to depict Jesus Christ as a human being rather than as the intangible, ethereal son of God alerts the reader to the reality of Christ's suffering on the cross. His pain and humiliation in the above passage brings across the horror of Christ's predicament in a manner in which the Gospels do not achieve, namely because Naimy transposes the point of view of the narrative away from a biographer to the man who is undergoing the torment. Naimy's employment of a narrative prose framework to retell a biblical story owes much of its style to the Russian realist writers he voraciously digested while in Poltava, and especially to Tolstoy's portrayal of a human Christ in his own later writings, especially *Soyedineniye i perevod chetyrokh yevangeliy* (Union and Translation of the Four Gospels). Throughout Naimy's essay on Christ, which principally illuminates the virtues of compassion and

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<sup>130</sup> In much the same way as Tolstoy had depicted a human Jesus in his own work, *Soyedineniye i perevod chetyrokh yevangeliy* (see p.53 passim).

<sup>131</sup> *Wajh yasū'*, from *al-Marāḥil, al-Majmū'ah al-kāmilah* (Beirut: Dār al-'ilm li-l-mulayn, 1971), p.42. See also Desouky (2010) pp.159-61 for Gibran's similarly human depiction of Jesus.

forbearance, the author frequently repeats the expression *malakūt allāhi fī qulūbikum* (lit. 'the kingdom of God is in your hearts').<sup>132</sup> Tolstoy himself used the phrase *tsarstvo Bozhiye vnutri vas* as the title of one of his most famous treatises on the nature of true Christian thinking, 'the kingdom of God is within you.' The connotations of the phrase, one that declares that God is not to be found in church rituals but inside one's heart, that within each person is the capacity for divinity and hence theosis, are matters that shall be covered more fully in the subsequent sub-chapters.

This theme of the human being potentially realising their full power of spiritual perception within themselves and achieving divinity as their ultimate goal in *an-niẓām al-kaunī* is examined continually in Naimy's essays.<sup>133</sup> Naimy expresses it explicitly in *Zād al-mī'ād*:

He is the Absolute God who is in the prophets who understands and reveals the God of the prophets. He is the self same God who is in every person who has the capacity to recognise God in everything and in every person.<sup>134</sup>

While in *al-Nūr wa al-daijūr*, Naimy uses the biblical trope of God creating man in God's image to put across the same concept:

This trinity works without fissure, singly and wholly, for the liberation of humanity from the noose of animal nature and for his elevation to where he becomes worthy of the inheritance that has been prepared

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<sup>132</sup> P.36 is a particularly good example as it gives a concise explanation of the meaning of the phrase.

<sup>133</sup> Echoes of similar ideas exist in Gibran's *al-Nabī* in the respective concepts *al-'insān al-kamīl* (the complete being) and *wiḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of existence). See also El-Desouky (2010), p.89.

<sup>134</sup> *Ad-Dīn wa a-š-šabāb*, p.221.

for him since eternity – none other than godliness. Has not it been said – and how true is it – that man is God’s image and likeness?<sup>135</sup>

The ultimate aim of humanity according to Naimy’s essays, that of becoming God himself, has a lot in common with the typical view of Orthodox Christianity of the purpose of religion, as explained by Carl S. Tyneh:

Religion has a lofty, holy and salutary purpose: that man, small, corruptible, weak and sinful, may, through it, achieve full and complete union with God, and through this union attain to personal happiness and blessedness, indeed, to achieve theosis, to become God by grace, as our Christian faith teaches us.<sup>136</sup>

Naimy likewise stressed that the potential for enlightenment came from within every person and true faith could only be found by people inside themselves and of their own volition. Many of his essays stress these aspects of Naimy’s thinking, but *al-Bayādir* in particular shows how Naimy’s spiritual outlook reflected contemporaneous literary trends, such as those found in Jibrān’s writings, and combined elements of Orthodox Christianity with modes of thinking that came from his reading of specific Russian authors, in particular Tolstoy, but also Dostoevsky, Gogol and Lermontov.

### **The Political Context of *Al-Bayādir***

It is vitally important, firstly, to discuss *al-Bayādir* in terms of the environment out of which the collection was produced. That Naimy should have related questions regarding the fundamental purpose of God and

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<sup>135</sup> *Al-Nūr wa al-dajjūr*, p.535.

<sup>136</sup> Carl S. Tyneh, *Orthodox Christianity: overview and bibliography* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova, 2003), p. xiii.

religion to socio-political issues engendered by the Second World War dovetails neatly with his professed allegiance to the later writings of Tolstoy, and with modern scholarship on Tolstoy's conversion experience. By his own confession, Tolstoy considered another major war (the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-8) to be a major factor in his reassessment of the role of religions,<sup>137</sup> but, as with Naimy's writings before *al-Bayādir*, commentators reckon Tolstoy's conversion to have started at least a dozen years before 1879,<sup>138</sup> the year of writing *Isповед'* (Confession).

In *al-Bayādir*, Naimy was building upon his more abstract views of spirituality and statehood that he had set out in the collections, *al-Marāḥil* and *Zād al-mī'ād*. We have already looked briefly at *Wajh yasū'* from *al-Marāḥil*, but many of the other essays carry on the theoretical deconstruction of the world around him in intellectual terms. Thus, we see ideas for the reinvigoration of his own country in *Nahḍat al-šarq al-'arabi* (Renaissance of the Arab East), along with spiritual-philosophical notions on the direction humanity is pursuing in *Anta al-insānīyyah* (You Are Humanity). Furthermore, increasing globalisation and the 'emergence' of an independent Arab world were important political features in what Bourdieu would call Naimy's 'field of cultural production.'<sup>139</sup> In *Zād al-mī'ād* we read similar theses on the nature of God, *Salām allāhi wa salām al-nās* (God's Peace and the People's Peace), life, *al-Maut wa al-ḥayāh* (Death and Life) and the growing international community, *Šannīn wa ad -dūlār* (Mount Sanin and the Dollar).

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<sup>137</sup> See Orwin (ed.) (2010), p.139.

<sup>138</sup> See Inessa Medzhibovskaya, *Tolstoy and the Religious Culture of his Time* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2008).

<sup>139</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, trans. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

Three years after the appearance of *Zād al-mī'ād* in 1936, however, his proposals of global peace, non-violence, anti-enslavement both by money and by societal forces, and the harmony of the universe, met with the beginning of the most violent and devastating wars that humanity had ever witnessed. This meeting of thesis and antithesis led to Naimy adopting a more political slant in his writings on religion. Society, politics and religion, as discussed below, overlapped constantly in his essays and for Naimy to produce a variegated tract on how he saw the main global issues, and more importantly how he believed that religion could provide an answer to those dilemmas, it was essential to plant religion and God firmly in the realm of the 'real' world. After all, *al-Bayādir* commenced life as a series of radio lectures which were broadcast by the Lebanese Broadcasting Station.<sup>140</sup> His writings, like so many of his essays which were printed initially in newspapers and journals, espouse the immediacy that such a political context, where the states of Europe were witnessing both deracination and the slaughtering of entire generations in the name of nationalism, required.

Nadeem Naimy, in his introduction to Naimy's works, describes most of his essays as being 'variations and elaborations on the theme already made familiar',<sup>141</sup> but it is important to us to read how a thinker and writer such as Naimy reacted to perhaps the most devastating event of the twentieth century, particularly as he had witnessed the preceding global conflict at first hand.<sup>142</sup> In spite of his own personal experiences, it is striking to the reader that Naimy views the war in universal, religious terms and his ideas for a solution to the

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<sup>140</sup> Nadeem Naimy, p.224.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Naimy describes the experience vividly in a number of chapters in volume II of *Sab'ūn*.

conflict do not rest on current human interactions. As Nadeem Naimy expresses it:

To arrive at a perpetual peace, human society must change the very ideological foundation on which it rests. Only an enlightened faith that God is the origin as well as the ultimate destiny of man, can provide human society in all its multifarious functions with a sense of direction and a unified and all-unifying purpose.<sup>143</sup>

### **The Primacy of Biblical Tropes in *al-Bayādir***

Although Gibran and Naimy shared an interest in pantheistic spiritual philosophy,<sup>144</sup> both writers prioritised biblical, and especially New Testament,<sup>145</sup> tropes in their literary texts. The Arabic title of Naimy's collection *al-Bayādir* is rendered in English as 'The Threshing Floors,' and it is a symbolic title on two different levels. Firstly, it is a reference to what he describes as being the most beautiful time of the year in Lebanon, when the harvest of wheat is collected in summer.<sup>146</sup> Secondly, it is a primordial biblical trope, of which more shall be said later. Of the first level, these days were for gathering together both intransitively as people and transitively the wheat, as well as purifying and cleansing the land by starting afresh and taking account of how much food has been grown for the people who depend upon it. Symbolically, this view of agriculture is one centred around subsistence farming. The signifiers

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<sup>143</sup> Nadeem Naimy, op. cit., p.225.

<sup>144</sup> El-Desouky (2010).

<sup>145</sup> More specifically Jesus Christ, of whom I shall write more later. See also El-Desouky (2010), esp. p. 159.

<sup>146</sup> *Al-Bayādir* (Beirut: Naufal, 2001), p.112.

within the text, the aura of gentle, family-based activities that surrounds the threshing and the proximity of non-farming persons observing the work, such as himself, lends itself to the suggestion that this is agriculture at a small, local level, echoing the Edenic atmosphere surrounding his childhood in Baskinta as described in *Sab'ūn*.

Immediately, the setting and focus brings to mind Yasnaya Polyana after 1879, where Tolstoy turned towards the peasantry and their lifestyle for clues as to in which direction a modern society ought to direct itself for the good of its children:

Tolstoy's utopia was a simpler world of universal subsistence agriculture, where all would raise their own food, and there would be no exploitation and no class divisions.<sup>147</sup>

Naimy, regardless of the fact that he is also aspiring towards a society of universal subsistence agriculture where greed does not cause divisions between members, has a different aim in mind. This utopia is simply another step towards the ultimate goal of enlightenment and communion with nature. Tolstoy's conviction that God can be experienced in the nature that is around you is an idea that Arabic literature had already given a great deal of attention to, as could be seen in many of the essays on Tolstoy produced for *Ḳalīl Baydas'* journal, *an-Nafā'is al-'aşriyyah*. A short story by Anṭūn Ballān (another former teacher of Naimy<sup>148</sup>) entitled '*Amal Aļļāh*', which Ballān describes as being influenced by the 'sayings' of Tolstoy, tells the story of a king who

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<sup>147</sup> Hugh McLean, 'Resurrection,' from Donna Tussing Orwin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.106.

<sup>148</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, pp.208-9.

realises the presence of God in the beauty of nature around him.<sup>149</sup> Following this line of thought, Naimy tells us in *al-Bayādir* that he can see the divine everywhere and this is one of the important points about the threshing season. Nature is infinitely complex and the magnificence of God's creation is to be found in the land all around you in the ever-present and continuing cycles of birth and death, whether it be how the seed of God was germinated in the soil, or how a grasshopper died on another stalk.<sup>150</sup> Outlining this complexity is intended to induce a sense of respect for nature, while at the same time, along with the personification of the sky and ground,<sup>151</sup> how they feel joyful at the coming together of people and the fruition of the crop, at the start of the essay, makes the reader feel that they can easily be a part of this beautiful, intricate system. Although Naimy's vision bears the traces of a reading of Sufi mysticism in Islamic culture, the text is saturated with Christian tropes. It is designed to be contemplative so that the reader, who will be moved to quietly celebrate the inherent beauty and complexity of nature, and will therefore be impelled to move their consciousness to a higher spiritual plane.

Evidently, the *al-Bayādir* collection is steeped in biblical terminology and symbolism. The very title itself, *Threshing Floors*, is highly significant for in the Bible, in the Second Book of Samuel and the First Book of Chronicles, David prophesied that his first temple would be built on the threshing floor of Araunah, or Ornan, the Jebusite, on the top of Mount Moriah.

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<sup>149</sup> *An-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* (no.7, volume II, 1910).

<sup>150</sup> *Al-Bayādir*, p.114.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p.112.

And Gad came that day to David, and said unto him, Go up, rear an altar unto the Lord in the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. (2 Samuel 24:18)

Then the angel of the Lord commanded Gad to say to David, that David should go up, and set up an altar unto the Lord in the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. (1 Chronicles 21:18)<sup>152</sup>

Its significance continues to the New Testament, where the gospels of Matthew and Luke refer to the threshing floor as regards the fate of humanity.

Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:12)<sup>153</sup>

The significance is symbolic, both for the Bible and for Naimy. At the windy situation of the threshing floor, the wheat is thrown into the air and the heavier grain falls to the earth while the chaff is blown away into the ether. This, therefore, is judgment. Naimy's threshing floors, just like his 'sieve' (*al-Ġirbāl* (the title of his first collection of essays on literary criticism))<sup>154</sup> is separating the good from the bad, and the trivial banalities (*qušūr*) from the vital, prime inner essence (*lubāb*):

Then a third enjoyment [along with the coming together of people and the beauty of nature] is the winnowing that separates the wheat from the chaff: the core essence from the trivialities.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Both citations from the King James version (KJV) of the Bible.

<sup>153</sup> KJV – the citation from the Gospel according to Luke is of a very close wording.

<sup>154</sup> Naimy refers to the process as a sieving on p.118.

<sup>155</sup> *Al-Bayādir*, p.116.

The title essay *al-Bayādir* carries Christian symbolism in the text from the very beginning. Aside from the more vague alliances between the farming themes of the essay and the similar agrarian tropes that run through the New Testament (and in particular the Gospels, if we think of the lamb of God, good ground, reaping what one sows and shepherds in various guises and significances), there are more oblique allusions to Christian tropes. Thus, the time of harvest is described as days of gathering together – a verbal expression that in Arabic, *ḥašara*, can be both intransitive for people and transitive in the sense of gathering, for instance, wheat into bundles. More complexly, however, Naimy is making a pun on the word *ḥašara*. In Arabic, ‘days of gathering together’ is written as *ayām al-ḥašr*– the plural of the expression *yaum al-ḥašr*, which means ‘the day of the congregation (of the dead),’ or in other words the Day of the Resurrection.<sup>156</sup> Resurrection, the possibility of new life, is a trope that infuses the entire essay with its promise of regeneration and rebirth.

Aside from the omnipresent trope of regeneration, there is the ubiquitous trope of sifting: separating good from bad, exceptional from banal. But this Christian symbolism is not so much directed towards an idea that good people will be separated from bad at the Day of Judgment (Naimy, mirroring Dostoevsky’s works that had been so instrumental in the creation of his own literary texts, did not believe in the capacity of a human to be purely evil from birth with no hope of salvation)<sup>157</sup>, but more against the social phenomena that

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<sup>156</sup> *Al-Bayādir*, p.112.

<sup>157</sup> See Irving Howe, ‘Dostoevsky: The Politics of Salvation’ (The Kenyon Review (vol.17, no.1, winter 1955)) and Lee D. Johnson, ‘Struggle for Theosis: Smerdyakov as Would-Be Saint’ in Robert Louis Jackson (ed.), *A New Word on The Brothers Karamazov* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004).

turn people's attention to evil. War, the essays' backdrop, was the most obvious of these sinister influences, but others, such as the attainment of money for the sake of wealth alone, was another.<sup>158</sup> Eventually, the essay delivers its Christian message with a reference to the Parable of the Tares, which appears in the Gospel according to Matthew (13:24-30). Even Naimy's phrasing is biblical as he warns:

Woe to those who grow darnel, for they shall reap darnel.<sup>159</sup>

Darnel is a plant that looks very similar to wheat until the ears, which are purple, appear. It is poisonous to humans and can cause death. However, as Jesus warned in the parable, it cannot be uprooted from the soil as weeding the darnel will have a good chance of destroying the wheat also. Instead, one has to wait until harvest, when the darnel can be sifted from the wheat and burned elsewhere. Naimy here not only calls to mind the traditionally Christian message of reaping what one sows (taken from St Paul's epistle to the Galatians), but combines it with his own advice to sieve the good crops from the bad in a metaphorical sense – as he goes on to warn the reader of boxthorn (*'ausaj*).<sup>160</sup>

Effectively, the reader experiences Christianity through the collection *al-Bayādir* on three different levels: indirect *non-literal* allusions to the societal atmosphere that conceived the teachings of Jesus (by this, I mean the references to the harmony of the agrarian lifestyle and the accentuation of the benefits to be reaped by abstention from the relentless pursuit of money in a capitalist society), *literal* allusions to the Bible and biblical characters

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<sup>158</sup> See, for example, *Bilād dīnuhā fī famihā* from *al-Bayādir*.

<sup>159</sup> *Al-Bayādir*, p.119.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

(references such as the ‘darnel’ quotation above) and direct quotations from the Bible. Of the three, the final type is the most rare and Naimy only occasionally states specifically the name of a biblical character from whom he is quoting directly. For instance:

It is that [the shadow of death] which is reiterated from the pulpits, ‘You have been dead and are now alive, then you will die and live again, then the process will be repeated.’ And it is that which comforts Job when he says, ‘The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’<sup>161</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Naimy here chooses to quote directly from the book of Job in an essay, *Bilād dīnuhā fī famihā* (A Country’s Religion is in its Mouth), that reads like a response to his reading of Dostoevsky.

### **Naimy’s Reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* in *al-Bayādir***

*The Brothers Karamazov* intrigued and perplexed Naimy<sup>162</sup> to the same extent as, if not more so than, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*<sup>163</sup> as much because of the philosophical and religious dilemmas it raised as for the brilliance of the prose. Evidence of Naimy’s literary respect for *The Brothers Karamazov* can be found in the essay in *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd* entitled ‘Dmitry Karamazov.’ After establishing that the reason, in his eyes, for Russia’s commanding position in Western literatures lies with ‘three of the giants of intellectual thought and

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<sup>161</sup> *Al-Bayādir*, p.139.

<sup>162</sup> As we know from the essay *Dmitri Karamazov* in Naimy’s collection, *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*.

<sup>163</sup> Naimy’s first reading of and reaction to *War and Peace* is given in *Sab’ūn* I, pp.281-2.

penmanship in the vast, Slavonic lands: Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Tolstoy,<sup>164</sup> Naimy goes on to examine the episode in *The Brothers Karamazov* when Dmitry is in a cell with his brother Alyosha, awaiting judgment on the murder case. Naimy focuses on the postulate that, as per Dostoevsky's beliefs, good and evil run parallel in all people and relates this to Dmitry's assertion that, 'in the hearts of all people there is the burning log of godliness that the ashes of evil and sin normally conceal.'<sup>165</sup> In order to reach this place where the godliness shines through one has to descend the steps of decline,<sup>166</sup> as Pitted Face did in *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*. Dmitry's conversion has the effect of inoculating him from the horrors Siberia holds because he now 'sees the sun'<sup>167</sup> of God, but we have to wonder whether Naimy, on account of never descending the steps of decline, fully submitted to the same revelation as Dmitry.

In *al-Bayādir* Naimy's view on *The Brothers Karamazov* is seen through a different filter. Father Zosima asserts in *The Brothers Karamazov* that Job's suffering brings the true glory of God's creation into sharper relief, by the refusal of his most faithful son to rage against God in spite of the horrors visited upon him.<sup>168</sup> Naimy's entire *al-Bayādir* collection, in spite of the pessimism expressed in essays such as *Ġadan tantahi al-ḥarb* (Tomorrow the War Ends) – 'people throughout history have predicted a war to end all wars, yet the earth continues in its way, mocking what engineers construct and

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<sup>164</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, p.112.

<sup>165</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, p.113.

<sup>166</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, p.113.

<sup>167</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, p.116.

<sup>168</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 377-9.

historians record'<sup>169</sup> – is a committed defence of the beauty and goodness of the world, God's world, and offers the hope of a peaceful future in spite of the threat of annihilation and devastation that the Second World War has brought. Indeed, the next essay after *Ġadan tantahi al-ḥarb* is called *Kayfa natafāhamu* (How We Can Understand Each Other) and pleads for comprehension based on mutual spiritual understanding, not solely on a linguistic basis.<sup>170</sup>

*Bilād dīnuhā fī famihā* explores many of the spiritual issues, such as the nature of true belief, that Naimy's reading of *The Brothers Karamazov* had raised, but in Naimy's hands a sense of national religion, which formed the bedrock of Dostoevsky's religious views,<sup>171</sup> is abandoned in favour of the true religion, the one that exists in people's hearts rather than just in the formulaic mantras that make up the church's dogma and which people accept fearfully and unquestioningly:

If a state's religion is in its mouth without being in its heart then that state will not know cooperation. And if a state does not know cooperation, it will not know brotherhood. And a state that does not know brotherhood does not know love. And a state that does not know love does not know God. And a state that does not know God has no real life inside it.<sup>172</sup>

Here, we can see a reading of the famous *Grand Inquisitor* episode in *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which Dostoevsky mounts an attack through the character of Ivan Karamazov upon the organised Catholic church that

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<sup>169</sup> *Al-Bayādir*, p.236.

<sup>170</sup> *Al-Bayādir*, pp.237-43.

<sup>171</sup> See Hudspith (2004), p.138 for Dostoevsky's ideas on a strictly *Russian* Christian Orthodoxy.

<sup>172</sup> *Al-Bayādir*, p.143.

promises salvation without the troubles of either a conscience or contemplation. Naimy is asserting that religion is a deeply personal experience and one has to believe in it truly, and not have one's faith channelled through the medium of a church, for that faith to have any validity. Logically, therefore, Naimy chose to focus on the character of Dmitri Karamazov when he wrote an essay on the novel for his later collection of essays on literary criticism, *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*,<sup>173</sup> for Dmitri is the character who, rather than choose any other fate and attempt to escape the punishment for a crime for which he is not responsible, chooses exile in Siberia because he now feels a joy in his life which the promise of salvation has awoken in him. Like Job, even the wretched misery of internal exile cannot dampen the faith that he has found in God, as aflame inside him is 'the burning log of godliness that the ashes of evil and sin normally conceal.'<sup>174</sup>

Dostoevsky's repudiation of the Grand Inquisitor is made through an impassioned defence of the Orthodox church, delivered by the elder member (the *starchestvo*) of an order of monks who have sacrificed all worldly possessions to dedicate themselves to God. Although he shares Dostoevsky's fear of a purely verbal, unfeeling, rhythmic religion that will eventually lead to a terrestrial perdition where loveless countries are inhabited by robots, Naimy maintains a position that denies the role of enlightenment to any established clerical entity, a point shared by Tolstoy:

If the men of our world could only be free of the deceit of the Church religion, which distorts the Christian teaching, and from the justification

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<sup>173</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd* (Beirut: Naufal, 1988), pp.111-7.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113.

and exaltation of a political structure based on this deception [...] then [...] the chief obstacle to religious awareness of the supreme law of love [...] would disappear from men's souls of its own accord.<sup>175</sup>

What we require is the attitude of Father Zosima insofar as a monk values God above any other materialistic concerns, but not dictated through the echelons of an organised church. Here, in the solution, Naimy brings the later thoughts and teachings of Tolstoy into the essay to negotiate the issue. Foremost amongst them is the warning of what ritualised and institutionalised religion brings in terms of its real goals in life:

If only the oaths that people utter were truly existent in their hearts then there would not be this dogfight that we are witnessing over dirhams and dinars...<sup>176</sup>

Capitalism, the worship of money over God, takes people's attention away from the true nature of God, as does the organised church and the concept of nationhood. At the time of writing *al-Bayādir*, the Second World War was draining the love of God out of people's hearts and turning them into savages, as the quoted passage above continues:

...their sons would not be behaving like wolves, brothers tearing apart their brothers, not be living like flies feeding off the wounds and pain of people.<sup>177</sup>

War has turned people into savages because of the importance that they place upon the ideas of money and nationhood, and only a turning to the

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<sup>175</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (London: Penguin, 1987), p.205.

<sup>176</sup> *Al-Bayādir*, pp.141-2.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

ideas of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and the fundamentals of Christian anarchism will bring people to a more complete understanding of the essence of life.

### **Tolstoy, the Doukhobors and *al-Bayādir***

It was not solely Dostoevsky and Tolstoy to whom Naimy turned for inspiration regarding the manner in which to live one's life. Inspired by his reading of the non-violent Christian sects that Tolstoy chronicled in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*<sup>178</sup> – such as the Doukhobors, of whom Naimy wrote in *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd* in an essay on Tolstoy entitled '*imlaq ar-rūḥ wa al-qalam* (The Giant of the Soul and of the Pen) – Naimy composed *Raġīf wa ibrīq mā'* (A Loaf and a Jug of Water) for *al-Bayādir*.

Naimy states in '*imlaq ar-rūḥ wa al-qalam* that it was through Tolstoy's writings that he first encountered the Doukhobors and their religious praxis. In keeping with their fundamental interpretation of Christ's teaching, the Doukhobors lived in cooperative communities and refused to acknowledge any form of state control – this included both the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church. Rather than perform church services as such, the Doukhobors had a plain, bare room for religious gatherings where the only adornment of such was the setting of salt, a loaf of bread and a jug of water on a table in order to signify the only elements necessary for basic life.<sup>179</sup> Aside from the salt, Naimy essentially reproduced the fundamental spirit behind the Doukhobors' gatherings for *Raġīf wa ibrīq mā'*. The character of

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<sup>178</sup> See especially the first chapter of this work: 'The doctrine of non-resistance to evil by force has been professed by a minority of men from the very foundation of Christianity.'

<sup>179</sup> George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Doukhobors* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p.19.

Naimy in the essay articulates the title in response to a question from a younger man asking what he needs for fulfilment in life. The young man himself has found only misery from the (allegorically described as female) distractions that have occupied his life, likening them to a box full of decorations and transient pleasures that do not offer the same kind of satisfaction that Naimy's bread and water do. As if to accentuate the references to Tolstoy in this essay, we hear the young man saying:

I put into my head information, in fact, a lot of information, from each of the great decorative arts: from literature, from art, from philosophy, from theology, from medicine, from much of history, from astronomy and from geography. On top of all of this I overlaid falsity, pretense and arrogance. But in it there was no wisdom, knowledge or freedom.<sup>180</sup>

Here, we can read an interpretation of Tolstoy who came to denounce the lifestyle he had led as a young man and who, in his work *Shto takoe iskusstvo?* (What is Art?), expounded a general theory that only in good art will we find the ability to communicate to the audience Christian qualities of love and brotherhood.<sup>181</sup>

### **Liminal Biblical References in *al-Bayādir***

*Raḡīf wa ibrīq mā'* draws our mind to the Doukhobors, but it is to the fundamental tropes of biblical teaching that many of the other essays refer, underscoring the postulate that Naimy was dialogising with a range of

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<sup>180</sup> *Al-Bayādir*, p.203.

<sup>181</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Penguin, 1995), see especially chapter XVI.

authors, the predominant of whom were Jibrān and Tolstoy. Some of Naimy's references can fall into the liminal areas that straddle both literal references to the Bible and non-literal allusions to the agrarian community that inspired Christ's teaching. In general, these liminal references tend to be quite vague and unspecific, yet interesting because of the associations they will create in the mind of the reader aware of Naimy's Christian education. For example, the essay *Hal uflisa al-dīn?* (Is Religion Bankrupt?) asks the reader:

Who amongst you when you ate unripe grapes and had your teeth dulled by the acid, would curse the grapevine and say there is nothing in the bunches but bad grapes? How would you endure the unripe grapes, secure that they will become sweet ones after a few, while not having any patience with those whose unchanging knowledge of God is like a bunch of unripe grapes and not having the faith that possibly a coming day could ripen them, and then you could distil from them heavenly nectar?<sup>182</sup>

Grapes are a biblical trope, employed here to symbolise the errors of mass judgment so dangerously displayed in the Second World War (cursing of the entire vine because of the unripe grapes) and the promise of renewed belief in God with the unripe grapes maturing and losing their bitterness. Naturally, they are symbolic in Christian praxis in the form of wine and represent both enjoyment in life in both testaments (we can think of the miracle at the wedding in Cana as an example) and the importance of a stronger support network in the form of the vine for spiritual flourishing.<sup>183</sup> As throughout the *al-*

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<sup>182</sup> *Al-Bayādir*, p.124.

<sup>183</sup> John 15:1-8 speaks specifically of Jesus as the 'true vine' and of God as the vinedresser (KJV).

*Bayādir* collection, Naimy uses Russian writings on the condition of the human soul poisoned by its environment (Dostoevsky<sup>184</sup>) and working the land for a renewed sense of purpose (Tolstoy) to inform the Christian scenery in his essays, against which backdrop the recurrent themes of patience for the prospect of a better life and the possibility of salvation for all humanity is articulated. It is these themes, especially that of patience, which will form the spine for the next part of our examination of Naimy's use of biblical imagery in his play on the life of Job.

### **Job: Naimy's Reading of a Pivotal Book**

We can reach a better understanding of Naimy's version of the Book of Job<sup>185</sup> through an analysis of what Naimy was reading during a critical stage of his artistic formation in Poltava, that is to say the later intellectual essays of Lev Tolstoy. It will assist us greatly in comprehending *Ayyūb* if we first digest the principles of Tolstoy's spiritual beliefs:

With the beginning, the understanding of life has become everything.

And the understanding of life has taken the place of God. And this understanding of life has become God.<sup>186</sup>

In 1881, while deeply immersed in the act of unravelling the complex threads of his life by articulating his religious beliefs, Tolstoy wrote

*Soyedineniye i perevod chetyrokh yevangeliy* (Union and Translation of the

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<sup>184</sup> As discussed previously with Raskolnikov's reaction to social and intellectual trends in *Crime and Punishment*.

<sup>185</sup> Once again, the parallels with Gibran should be stressed here: in *al-Ajnihāt al-mutakassirah* (Cairo: Maktabat al-hilāl, 1922 (pp.93-4)) Gibran's protagonist states that 'the Book of Job was more beautiful to me than David's Psalms.'

<sup>186</sup> Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobraniye sochinenii*, redaktor S. A. Gozanova (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literaturi, 1957), vol. 24, p.25.

Four Gospels), from which the above quotation is taken. Twenty years earlier, Tolstoy had met Pierre Joseph Proudhon, the famous French socialist, during his trip around Europe when the latter was living in exile in Brussels.<sup>187</sup> The two men found that they shared some fundamental beliefs on spirituality, amongst which was a similar conception of the notion of God. They both discarded any vulgar idea of an anthropomorphous God in favour of God as a kind of natural, supreme law, an abstract idea that permeated everything in the universe.

For Tolstoy and Proudhon the Bible was a great presence in both their moral lives and their literary works, but Tolstoy believed the wording of the Bible could be improved upon in order to reflect more precisely the teachings of Jesus – even if, like Naimy, he considered the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel according to Matthew to be one of the most beautiful and noblest passages in the Bible.<sup>188</sup> Thus, in the above quotation we find that the *logos* (with all its complex Christian associations – not just the ‘word’ but also reason and Jesus Christ the embodiment of God’s word) has been replaced with ‘understanding of life’ – a more general, intellectually more accessible, term that suggests more readily, in the opinion of Tolstoy, the omnipresence of the concept of God the natural law in both the human world and the universe.<sup>189</sup>

This dialogue between Tolstoy and Proudhon took place in the form of Tolstoy’s translation of the gospels, which through its language and tropes

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<sup>187</sup> R. F. Christian, *Tolstoy: a Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: CUP, 1969), p.159.

<sup>188</sup> *Sab’ūn* I, p.129.

<sup>189</sup> David Matual, ‘The Gospel According to Tolstoy and the Gospel According to Proudhon,’ *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol.75, No.1 (Jan., 1982), p.120.

negotiated a position on God and Christianity whilst echoing the narratives of Proudhon. Naimy's texts show a similar process, as the tropes and metaphors he employs to discuss God and Christianity recollect the works of Tolstoy. As mentioned above, Naimy considered the Sermon on the Mount to be the most beautiful and inspirational passage in the Bible and took some of his most profound spiritual expressions and, I would say, convictions on the fundamental points on the role of humanity in a purposeful existence from the passage. (Here, as elsewhere, I would argue that Naimy's theosophic expressions were unfixed and adaptable, but many of his firm convictions can be traced back to the *Christian Sermon on the Mount*.) The Book of Job, however, is different. It provides a source of spiritual wisdom to Naimy, but also the chance to re-invent its natural drama in the form of a work of modern Arabic literature.

For a writer like Naimy, who believed steadfastly in Karma as the law of moral causation,<sup>190</sup> implying that human beings are the architects of their own fate, the story of Job is an unusual and somewhat contradictory story to take as the basis for a literary text. In the Book of Job, the title character does everything that a jealous god could possibly ask of him: he leads a pious life, brings happiness and affluence to his wife and children, and suffers from none of the moral weaknesses that had plagued most of his biblical predecessors going right back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. All of his good deeds, however, go unrewarded when God, who had previously considered Job to be a model of decent comportment and moral steadfastness, seeks to

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<sup>190</sup> As Nadeem Naimy (1967) notes, Naimy was so intrigued by Karma that in his *Wajh yasū'* (The Face of Jesus) essay he attempted to fit Jesus with his praxis of countering evil with good actions into the Karmic doctrine.

prove to Satan that Job would still be as loyal to Him even without the good fortune that He had bestowed upon him. Thus, Job, far from reaping the benefits of a life devoted to virtuous works and dutiful reverence of God, finds himself a pawn in God's wager – his mind and body deteriorating in the process. Even allowing for the possibility that Job may be being punished for the misdeeds of a previous life, a condition allowed in the Buddhist doctrine of Karma, there is no mention of these misdemeanours in the text. Job just seems to be a good person to whom very bad things happen without any explanation.<sup>191</sup>

The Book of Job offers one of the most intriguing puzzles of the Bible, for which a fairly insubstantial answer was offered by the word of God. The question posed by the book in the form of some of the most beautiful poetic passages of the Bible is: why do bad things happen to good people?<sup>192</sup>

Buddhism, as mentioned above, gave its own answer in the form of previous existences: the repercussions of crimes committed in such previous existences would be felt in this present one and would be experienced until such a time as the soul becomes emancipated and oneness with the sea of Being is attained.<sup>193</sup> God's explanations at the end of the Book of Job are obscure and largely unhelpful, a number of references to the natural world and the possibilities of living are followed by the sudden restoration of fortunes to Job (the children and servants who have died in the process of

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<sup>191</sup> Job's name alone can signify the unfairness of suffering, as commented on by Fred Johnson in 'A Phonological Existential Analysis to the Book of Job' (Journal of Religion and Health, vol.44, no.4, winter 2005).

<sup>192</sup> Harold Kushner used the Book of Job as the theological framework for his work *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken, 1981), quoted in Johnson (2005) above.

<sup>193</sup> See Whitley R. P. Kaufman, 'Karma, Rebirth and the Problem of Evil,' Philosophy East and West, vol. 55, no.1 (Jan., 2005).

testing Job do not, however, receive any such compensation for their tribulations).

It is on this point that Naimy believed that he could offer a better explanation of the Book of Job and infuse the narrative with some of the ideas of Russian literature and Russian Orthodoxy that had been expounded in many of his other works. Naimy worked with some of the theosophic principles to which he had been introduced during his studentship in Walla Walla:

1. Belief in one absolute incomprehensible and supreme Deity, or infinite essence, which is the root of all nature, and all that is, visible and invisible.

2. Belief in man's eternal immortal nature, which, being a radiation of the Universal Soul, is of an identical essence with it.<sup>194</sup>

He bound them together with the Christian Anarchic principles Tolstoy had set out in his reworking of the Gospels, Naimy created a different Job different from the Old Testament who, while keeping to the main tenets of the original story, would be offered different explanations for the manner of his decline and would signify an altered perception of the fate of humanity.

### **Naimy's Reimagining of the Book of Job and Tolstoy's Teachings**

Tolstoy had wanted to bring Christianity back to its original message by his reworking of the Gospels. Indeed, he had come to the conclusion that 'Christianity as it existed in [his] own day was a monstrous perversion of the

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<sup>194</sup> Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1893), p.2.

original faith,<sup>195</sup> the true message of Christ having been corrupted by the works of Saint Paul who had attributed divinity to the human Jesus. But there was another reason for this perversion: the fact that the Gospels had had their true message obscured by language. Tolstoy translated the Gospels from the original Greek and set them into a dialect that he thought best reflected the Christian message that he had determined from his lengthy commentaries on the texts. What Naimy did with the Book of Job was from a literary point of view quite similar and reminds us of Jauss' ideas on Goethe's and Valéry's *Faust* outlined above:<sup>196</sup> the Book of Job was taken from a poetic form and transposed into the genre of drama. The effect of this transposition was quite radical and very much in keeping with the Russian literature that Naimy had been avidly consuming all his life.

Firstly, it radically alters the viewpoint of the story. While in the Bible there was a narrator who stood outside the events, preaching to the audience through the medium of poetry (a genre that in Arabic presupposes the very personal perception of the writer and the conversion of that perception into the text<sup>197</sup>), drama is character driven and its essence is to bombard the reader with a number of different world-views and opinions – the resulting dialogue that takes place between them a necessary ingredient in the energetic thrust of the narrative. The reader then sees the Book of Job less as a homily and more as a negotiation between both the characters and themselves on the questions that the story raises.

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<sup>195</sup> Matual, op. cit., p.123.

<sup>196</sup> Jauss (1982), pp.110-38.

<sup>197</sup> Roger Allen, *The Arabic Literary Heritage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.107-8.

Secondly, the decision to place Job in the genre of drama placed the story more identifiably inside the parameters of the Russian realist school with which Naimy had been so enthralled while studying at Poltava.<sup>198</sup> Naimy's Job has a wife and daughter who speak and interact with him, argue with and console him, find his faults and lend him support. Instead of being *anonymous*, descriptive attachments in the biblical medium, where they are almost as shallow and undeveloped as the seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels that are listed amongst his property, Zulaykah and Talīdah, his wife and daughter, respectively, are living and thinking people, capable of affecting Job's actions and thoughts, albeit not to an extent where they can override his unswerving devotion to God.

As the drama unfolds, we find that the thrust of the play alternatively engages with the sympathy of the reader as Job maintains his dignity in the face of the illnesses and misfortunes that have stricken him, before inciting the same reader's irritation by his intransigence and seeming unwillingness to listen to anyone else's point of view. The dynamic that is created between Job and the other characters around him helps to fuel this narrative tension as the creative input of Zulaykah and Talīdah into the drama increase the tension. We can sympathise with Zulaykah's frustration at Job's unswerving devotion to God, in spite of the misery that such devotion has apparently caused their lives in recent times:

Ayyūb

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<sup>198</sup> *Sab'un* I, pp.271-298, *Min yaumiyyāī* offers an account of the type of literature he was reading in Poltava, including playwrights such as Gogol and Ostrovsky.

Forbearance without piety is paralysis and gradual perdition.

Zulayk̄ah

Perhaps that is what your three friends, the Temanite [Eliphaz], the Shuhite [Bildad] and the Naamathite [Zophar], taught you about God? I myself am fed up with them congregating silently around you for seven days and seven nights, before starting to rebuke you without any mercy and blaming all of this on you because of so many of your crimes. I am sick and tired of being a host to them.<sup>199</sup>

Zulayk̄ah is a more effective, sensitive foil of practical, domestic considerations to Job's other-worldly, holy, unshakable determination to follow the will of God even if it results in his losing everything that is precious to him.<sup>200</sup> While Zulayk̄ah attempts to rattle his state of celestial bliss by pointing out the obvious – that his alleged friends are making his psychological condition worse by claiming that all his adversities are his own fault – Talīdah tries to break through her father's mental barriers by displays of filial loyalty and love:

Talīdah

You will not escape from me ever again. Here you are in my arms.

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<sup>199</sup> *Ayyūb* (Beirut: Naufal, 1988), p.83.

<sup>200</sup> This trope, the dichotomy between two opposing characters, bears the narrative traces of a reading of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, as discussed below.

Ayyūb

[He tries to stand but cannot, then he starts to push his daughter away from him with all the strength he has left.]

Get away from me, Talīdah. Be careful of me. Don't dirty your hands in the pus of my sores.

Zulayḳah

Talīdah! My daughter! O, my last hope! Don't touch him. There is an infection in his sores. It's enough for me that I have not caught it. Don't add yet more to my distresses.

Talīdah

An infection?!!

[(... )she takes handfuls of ashes and scatters them over his head and her head.]

Is there an infection even in these ashes?! An infection cannot live in these ashes. It is gold dust, the purest of gold dust. These ashes are Ayyūb's glory, Ayyūb's treasure, Ayyūb's power, Ayyūb's nobility. These

ashes show what Ayyūb once was, and what he will be again. These ashes are the foundry in which Ayyūb was smelted. The ashes are the phoenix which had to be burnt so it could return, rise up out of the ashes. These ashes are the ashes of blessing. These ashes come from the divine fireplace. They are the banquet that I prepared for my bridegroom and that my bridegroom prepared for me. The banquet of the ashes is both pure and the purifier.<sup>201</sup>

Talīdah's final assertion in this monologue, that the ashes in which her father is seated are not a curse but a treasure, both that which is pure and that which will purify, remind us of the idea of regeneration after catastrophic wars, as communicated in *al-Bayādir*. The ashes represent the possibility that Job will be able to restore himself to good health and fortune by the power of his own spiritual will – he has transcended the need to devote his pious energies to the God that stands outside himself and can now direct all his attention on the God that exists within him and which he shall now be able, much like Naimy in his own life aspired, after his life of abstemiousness and self-denial, to enter the final stage of theosis and become the godhead<sup>202</sup> himself.

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., pp.90-2.

<sup>202</sup> I have used the term 'godhead' here for clarity, as it refers to the triune nature of God in the Orthodox Christian tradition manifest in a united essence (see John Renard, *Islam and Christianity: Theological Themes in Comparative Perspective* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2011), p.102).

### Visions of God: Dostoevsky's Smerdyakov and *Mirdād*

By his own reckoning, Naimy believed that his later work *Mirdād* (The Book of Mirdād)<sup>203</sup> represented the culmination of his own philosophical and religious thoughts.<sup>204</sup>

Based on the story of Noah in the Bible, the word *mirdād* comes from the verb *radda*, amongst whose meanings are 'to give back' and 'to reappoint,' both of which would apply to the central character of the book.<sup>205</sup> High up on a mountain summit, a place so elevated that locals doubt the narrator's chance of reaching the top, lives a community that traces its lineage back to Noah. Noah states to his son Shem that the ninth human to travel on the ark will return to the community and preach wisdom to its members, saving it from its self-destruction, and that they must 'make room for him in [the] sanctuary.'<sup>206</sup> The son is confused because there were evidently only eight people on the ark: Noah, his wife, Naamah, his three sons, Ham, Shem and Japeth, and their anonymous wives. The ninth passenger 'was a stowaway, known and seen by me alone,'<sup>207</sup> Noah tells Shem. Instantly, Noah's esoteric evasiveness calls to mind another quotation from the equally impenetrable Smerdyakov in conversation with Ivan Karamazov:

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<sup>203</sup> It should perhaps be noted here that Naimy originally wrote and published *The Book of Mirdād* in English (Beirut: Sader's Library, 1948); his Arabic translation came out four years later (Beirut: Matba'at al-Manahil, 1954).

<sup>204</sup> *Sab'ūn* III, p.213.

<sup>205</sup> Nijland (1975) translates *Mirdād* as 'the one who returns,' but *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, J.M. Cowan (ed.) (Urbana, IL: Otto Harrassowitz KG, 1994) does not list the intransitive as one of the verb's meanings.

<sup>206</sup> *Mirdād* (Beirut: Naufal, 1980), p.12; *The Book of Mirdād* (Bombay: Tripathi, 1954), p.10. All subsequent quotations from the Bombay edition.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

‘There’s no ghost here, sir, only us two, and a certain third person. No doubt about it, that third person’s right here between us.’ [Said by Smerdyakov]

‘Who is that? Who’s here? Who’s this third person?’ Ivan, terrified, looked around and glanced quickly into every corner to see if anyone was there.

‘The third one is God, sir, providence itself, right here beside us, only it’s no good looking for it, you won’t find it.’<sup>208</sup>

If we take Smerdyakov to be as Lee D. Johnson’s essay suggests,<sup>209</sup> the would-be saint who is far closer to God and theosis than a first reading of his malicious persona may suggest, then he bears a lot of spiritual knowledge common to both him and Noah. They are, in effect, two persons who are closer to God and so therefore can see the presence of God where others are unable to do so. With his keen spiritual insights, Mirdād joins these other two characters in their proximity to the godhead. Before we analyse the words of Mirdād and the community in which he appears, we must first go on the same journey undertaken by the narrator to reach the summit and find out what it means as regards Naimy’s vision of the spiritual universe.

### ***Mirdād* and Naimy’s Reading of Tolstoy’s Essays on Religion**

In the Old Testament, Noah was told to build an ark by God in preparation for the flood that he was about to send to the earth in order to purge it of all

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<sup>208</sup> *The Brothers Karamazov*, p.782.

<sup>209</sup> Jackson (2004), op. cit.

the wicked people who had debased his creation.<sup>210</sup> Naimy had already employed the flood trope extensively in some of his spirituality-centred essays, especially in the essays of *al-Bayādir*.<sup>211</sup> What appeared in *Mirdād* was a radical reworking of the Noah story that accommodates spiritual ideas such as Karma, that he, like Tolstoy before him, had uncovered through his study of eastern religions,<sup>212</sup> while reminding us of Gibran's redeployment of the Bible in his literary texts.

In *Mirdād*, like his re-imagining of the Book of Job, Naimy adapted the content of the biblical story to construct a more modern style of prose. *Mirdād* initially imitated the form of the novel by placing Naimy's philosophical treatises within the framework of a character-driven narrative structure, but proceeds to swerve away from the reader's 'horizon of expectations.'<sup>213</sup>

Naimy's biblical characters, meanwhile, are placed in a real setting, the mountainous environment around Naimy's home in Lebanon, but in a fantastic situation that consequently blurs the distinction between the real and the imaginary.<sup>214</sup>

The narrator announces his decision to climb up the flint slope towards the summit of Altar via a narrow, smooth-faced slope, in spite of the presence of

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<sup>210</sup> Genesis, 6:5-22 (KJV).

<sup>211</sup> See *Āl-ʿāṣifāh* passim for Naimy's use of the word *aṭ-ṭūfān* to connote impending, or already occurring, disasters.

<sup>212</sup> Evidence of this can be seen in Tolstoy's religious writings, an accessible collection of which can be found in *I Cannot Be Silent: writings on politics, art and religion*, trans. W. Gareth Jones (Bristol: The Bristol Press, 1989). See also Paul Carus, *Karma / Nirvana* (La Salle, Ill: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1973), preface by Leo Tolstoy.

<sup>213</sup> Jauss (1982), p.44 passim.: 'the literary work can [...] confront the reader with a new, "opaque" reality that no longer allows itself to be understood from a pre-given horizon of expectations.'

<sup>214</sup> Thus, *Mirdād* evokes certain elements of magical realism, as defined by Wendy Faris in *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004). For a definition of the word 'fantastic' as a liminal space of uncertainty between naturally explicable and uncanny, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to Literary Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

two easier options.<sup>215</sup> Upon hearing the news, the locals are sceptical, knowing only of people who have tried to ascend the notoriously steep and treacherous flint slope but have failed to attain their goal. The narrator listens to them politely, but is resolutely fixed upon his decision and proceeds towards climbing the flint slope the next day.<sup>216</sup> Here immediately we see elements of the Russian literature that Naimy had been reading and to which we have referred already. The factor of personal choice in following the path to spiritual enlightenment (rather than following the dicta of an organised church) finds an expression in the character of Pitted Face and is also an important and necessary part of Dostoevsky's fiction,<sup>217</sup> while the fact that people should show ignorant awe and reverence towards the unknown bears significant traces of Tolstoy's teachings. For Tolstoy and Naimy, the essence of Christianity could only be found by casting aside the trappings of the church and all its pomp and ceremony, and by seeking then the universal truths that exist within humans themselves. Tolstoy, in one of the works Naimy read in Poltava, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, expressed the problem with the church lucidly and pointedly:

In spite of all the external varnish of modernity, learning and spirituality which the members of the Church begin nowadays to assume in their works, their articles, their theological journals, and their sermons, the practical work of the Russian Church consists of nothing more than keeping the people in their present condition of coarse and

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<sup>215</sup> *The Book of Mirdād*, p.13.

<sup>216</sup> Intriguingly, in clues which further bond the identities of the author and fictional narrator, *Sab'ūn III* includes photographs of Naimy on the summit of Mount Sannine (217) and 'Towering Rock' (223).

<sup>217</sup> Especially in such novels as *Crime and Punishment*, *Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. On this point, see Malcolm V. Jones, 'Dostoevskii and religion' from W. J. Leatherbarrow (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002).

savage idolatry, and worse still, strengthening and diffusing superstition and religious ignorance, and suppressing that living understanding of Christianity which exists in the people side by side with idolatry.<sup>218</sup>

This same 'coarse and savage idolatry' exists in *Mirdād* in metaphorical form, with all the objects of their idolatry being out of reach to the ordinary believers.

When I revealed my determination to one of the local mountaineers he fixed me with two flaming eyes, and striking his hands together, shouted in terror,

“Flint slope? Never be so foolish as to give your life away so cheap.<sup>219</sup>

Ordinary here means those who do not choose the difficult route towards enlightenment, staying at the bottom of the flint slope, looking in fear and wonder up towards the top of the mountain, the 'Altar Peak' where the community had been built in honour of the ark, but never having the faith themselves to make the ascent up towards it. They live their lives in blind fascination of the supposedly unattainable and think that anyone who tries to climb up the notoriously treacherous flint slope is deranged.

The narrator's difficult climb up the side of the mountain is full of recognisably Tolstoyan tropes, which promulgate a culture of reform in society. Having established that the narrator is one of the men who, like Tolstoy, will see beyond the church for what it signifies and realise that the path towards Jesus and divinity is harder but more rewarding than simply

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<sup>218</sup> *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, p.77.

<sup>219</sup> *The Book of Mirdād*, p.13.

attending mass and singing hymns, Naimy takes the reader on a journey in which he sees the narrator shorn of everything that is important to him in the world until he is literally stripped down to the bare human being that was born into the world.<sup>220</sup>

When Tolstoy commenced the latter phase of his life, which was characterised by a devotion to fundamental Christianity, he made an outward show of jettisoning any material wealth and luxuries.<sup>221</sup> He began to wear peasants' clothes on his estate in Yasnaya Polyana<sup>222</sup> and a glimpse through his bibliography of published works after 1869, when, according to Medzhibovskaya, his religious conversion began in earnest (although he wrote of religion as being a form of madness for salvation, rather than truth<sup>223</sup>), shows that he committed himself to writing far less profitable essays and in general shunned the lucrative printing of fiction.

### **Mirdād, Tolstoy and Anti-Materialism**

Naimy's anti-materialism was fostered in the company of Kahlil Jibrān and the climate of pursuing personal paths towards spirituality that saw a rise in popularity at the beginning of the twentieth century. As mentioned before, there were many different intellectual trends apparent in their outlook (including Indian thinkers and the US Transcendentalist movement), but

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<sup>220</sup> *Mirdād*, pp.14-31.

<sup>221</sup> Tolstoy's habits and rituals in his later life have been well documented, not least by Ivan Bunin, in *The Liberation of Tolstoy (Osvobozhdenie tolstogo)* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

<sup>222</sup> This was mocked as an affectation by the painter, Ilya Repin, who painted a famous portrait of Tolstoy in his peasant garb ('Leo Tolstoy Barefoot,' 1901), but noted that his dinner was served by waiters in white gloves (Orlando Figes, 'Local Heroes,' (RA Magazine, no.98, spring 2008).

<sup>223</sup> Medzhibovskaya (2008), p.134.

Naimy developed his own distinctive understanding of anti-materialism in *Mirdād*.<sup>224</sup>

Mirdād's narrator sees himself similarly giving up all of his material possessions. The first to be taken from him are the seven loaves of bread he has taken up the mountain for sustenance as he climbs:

[The shepherd] reached down and took a loaf. Believing that he was hungry I said to him very gently and very sincerely,

“We will share this frugal meal. There is enough bread for both of us – and for the bellwether.”

To my almost paralyzing astonishment he threw the first loaf to the goats, then the second and third, and so until the seventh, taking a bite of each for himself.<sup>225</sup>

Worse still is to come for the narrator as then his clothes are taken from him by a strange, old woman, who uses his garments to dress the naked young girl who is standing next to her in the grotto. In answer to his pleas for mercy, the woman recites a peculiar rhyme:

Less possessing – less possessed.

More possessing – more possessed.

More possessed – less assessed.

Less assessed – more assessed.<sup>226</sup>

Here, we are reminded not only of Naimy's summation of New York and its rampant materialism (see above), but also of Job in Naimy's play *Ayyūb*, who

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<sup>224</sup> Both Naimy's *Sab'ūn* and his biography of Kahlil Gibran give accounts of the intellectual atmosphere surrounding both writers at this time, but readers can also look to *Fī-l-ġirbāl al-jadīd* in order to gauge the kind of spiritual writers in whom Naimy had taken an interest.

<sup>225</sup> *The Book of Mirdād*, p.15.

<sup>226</sup> *Mirdād*, p.18.

responds to the disasters that have befallen him by stating the lines that appear in the book of the Bible: 'Naked I emerged from the womb of my mother and naked I return there. The Lord gave. The Lord took. Blessed be the name of the Lord.'<sup>227</sup> Both the shepherd and the woman offer aphorisms as comfort for the evident disaster that has befallen the climber, just as Job offers himself verbal comfort. In spite of the obvious setbacks – our narrator is now hungry, naked and bleeding from his climb up the slope, as well as being cold and exhausted – he carries on his journey because the ultimate destination, that of self-divinity, is more important to him than clothes and food. Further humiliation awaits him, however, as a malicious couple and a fierce dog take his staff from him (his last possession) and chase him out of the grotto so that they may use it for their own coital enjoyment.<sup>228</sup>

There are undeniably elements of Buddhism, Taoism and Sufi Islam in Naimy's construction of a spiritual expression in *Mirdād* that puts the soul in ascendancy over corporeal and material concerns. They also remind us of how Naimy's experiences of stridently capitalist New York caused Naimy to prioritise spiritual well-being over the pursuit of money. All of the tropes used here, albeit in more extreme versions, point us towards Naimy's New York encounter and Tolstoy's beliefs towards the end of his life: the garb that Tolstoy wore instead of the fineries that he had been used to, the meat that Tolstoy cleared from his diet as he pledged himself to a vegetarian diet, Tolstoy's alignment of himself with the land instead of the luxuries of the home, his abandonment of possessions as a way towards the path of Christ

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<sup>227</sup> *Ayyūb*, p.73 passim.

<sup>228</sup> *Mirdād*, pp.18-21.

and God, and the baseness of carnal lust as displayed by the couple who force the narrator out of the cave. Work, not comfort, was the underlying principle of life which Tolstoy advocated:

I renounced the life of our class, having recognized that it is not life but only a semblance of life, and that the conditions of luxury in which we live deprive us of the possibility of understanding life. I knew that in order to comprehend life I must understand the life not of the minority of those of use who are parasites, but of the simple working people, and of the meaning they give to life. The ordinary working people around me were the Russian people and it was to them that I turned, and to the meaning they give to life. This meaning, if it is possible to describe, is as follows. Every person comes into the world through the will of God. And God created man in such a way that each of us can either destroy his soul or save it. Man's purpose in life is to save his soul; in order to save his soul he must live according to God.

In order to live according to God one must renounce all the comforts of life, work, be humble, suffer and be merciful.<sup>229</sup>

Having been relieved of all the comforts of life right down to his clothes and food, the narrator finds himself staring at the Black Pit:

One hesitant step. Another hesitant step. At the third I felt as if the mountain had suddenly slipped from under my feet, and I found me caught in the churning billows of a sea of darkness which sucked my breath and tossed me violently down,—down,—down.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Lev Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (London: Penguin, 1987), p.67.

<sup>230</sup> *The Book of Mirdād*, p.21.

Eventually, he hears a voice saying to him, 'Arise, o happy stranger. You have attained your goal.'<sup>231</sup> Tolstoy experienced a similar sensation to the narrator, that of being rewarded after hardship, in a dream at the end of *A Confession*:

I begin looking around and before anywhere else I look beneath me, where my body is dangling and in the direction where I feel I am bound to fall very soon. I look below, and I cannot believe my eyes. I am at a height not just of, say, an extremely tall tower or mountain, but I am at a height such as I could never have imagined.

I cannot even discern whether I can see anything there below, in the bottomless abyss over which I am hanging and into which I am being drawn.<sup>232</sup>

Tolstoy realises, however, that he will not fall because something will not let him:

I grope about, look around and see that beneath me, under the middle of my body, there is a single support and when I look up I am lying on it in a position of secure balance, and that it alone gave me support before. <sup>233</sup>

For both writers, the abyss is not the end of their existence as they might have imagined, but instead the means through which they come to realise the solidity of their spiritual beliefs and how they act as a prism, through which they perceived and understand the world.

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid., p.22.

<sup>232</sup> *A Confession*, p.79.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

Once he has unconsciously reached the Altar Peak, where he is welcomed by the bound abbot, Shamadam, dressed in his clothes and given the Book of Mirdād, the narrator suddenly experiences a fantastic series of events as the abbot and Altar Peak disappear and he finds himself outside the grotto once more – the events showing some of the inexplicable nature of the universal system. At this point, the second part of *Mirdād* begins, in which we read the sermons of Mirdād, the mysterious ninth passenger of the ark and a figure of divine wisdom to the assembled community on the mountain top. The idea of a human figure trying to save humanity from its own folly and self-destruction has echoes of Jesus Christ in its creation – a point that has been picked up by Nadeem Naimy, who sees Mirdād as specifically Christ in his second coming:

The premise [of *Mirdād*], we believe, had first been established in Naimy's mind as early as his student days in Nazareth, Christ's home town. The figure of Christ, the God who took a human form in order to usher humanity, doomed to destruction by its own folly, into the path of eternal salvation, had then filled Naimy's young mind with awe and admiration and led him to shape his life and thinking in the light of the Master's character and teachings. The premise firmly established in Naimy, the Nazarene, is that human society, entangled in its artificial multiplication of needs, is doomed and that the only way to the good life and to final salvation is through the God-man, Jesus Christ.<sup>234</sup>

Nadeem Naimy goes on to say that this view of 'the futility of modern civilisation and society,' which can only be saved through Christ, also contains significant traces of the influence of both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky's Grand

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<sup>234</sup> Nadeem Naimy, op. cit., p.308.

Inquisitor, themes that we have covered in some detail regarding Naimy's other writings above.<sup>235</sup>

### **Similarities Between the Altar Peak Community and the Doukhobors**

The idiosyncratic set-up of the community on Altar Peak also bears the elements of another subject of great interest for both Tolstoy and Naimy (through his reading of Tolstoy) that we have already looked at: the Doukhobors. Tolstoy displayed his respect and admiration for other non-violent Christian sects, such as the Mennonites (who were exempted from military service by Catherine the Great) and Quakers, both mentioned in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*,<sup>236</sup> but he showed a particular interest in the fate of the Doukhobors, whose refusal to accept any authoritarian interference in their lives, devotion to God and complete disavowal of violence of any kind, coincided to a great extent with Tolstoy's own philosophical and religious thoughts.<sup>237</sup> We have already looked at how Naimy took an interest in the Doukhobors himself in an essay in *Fi al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, entitled '*Imlāq ar-rūḥ wa-l-qalam* (Colossus of the Soul and of the Pen, 1960), but we shall turn now to how the organization of the Shamadam sect on Altar Peak is a creation that negotiates with the structure of the Doukhobor society.

Firstly, there is no established church on Altar Peak (Naimy's texts treat spirituality as personal expressions and examines religion in terms of personalities rather than establishments). Given Naimy's and Tolstoy's

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., p.309.

<sup>236</sup> Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (London: Walter Scott, 1894), p.22 .

<sup>237</sup> In fact, Tolstoy donated the royalties from the sales of his novel, *Resurrection*, to the Doukhobors to help their cause (Holman, 'The Sanification of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*,' in Simms (ed.) op. cit. (1997)).

general opposition to the established church, especially when it finds its interests intertwined with that of the state, this is to be expected but the formation of the Altar Peak community gives this fact an added significance. Its members do not have specific times for meetings, but converse generally around meals:

Upon that eve the Eight were gathered round the supper board with Mirdād standing to one side and silently awaiting orders.

One of the ancient rules for Companions was to avoid, so much as possible, the use of the word 'I' in their speech. Companion Shamadam was boasting of his achievements as Senior. [...] Companion Micayon gently reprimanded him.<sup>238</sup>

The informal, egalitarian meetings the community conducts remind us of the religious meeting of the Doukhobors in the form of the 'sobranya:'

The character of the sobranya is completely alien to political system, man-made legalities and democratic procedure. The underlying principle is that God is present and available; and it is His will, not rules nor order and majorities of men, which is expected to influence decision. Moreover, it is assumed that as the same God is in every heart, the desired unanimity depends upon each person's giving up his own individuality so that the God within him may merge with the God in others, and in this corporate union is found the consensus of the meeting ... The effectiveness of the sobranya lies not in a building, which is unnecessary; not in ritual, which is minimal; not in the preaching, which is incidental; not in personal communions and prayer,

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<sup>238</sup> *The Book of Mirdād*, p.37.

for which there is no provision; and not in the heightened sensitivity of mind and heart reaching for truth, because this is not characteristic.<sup>239</sup>

Although they have no church, Mirdād tells the community they are starting to slide away from their core principles by inviting the outside society to visit them and bring them wealth and gifts. By concentrating on the money and gifts that the Day of the Vine brings, the community has forgotten about the reasons they were established in the first place, in order to propagate the true faith that the ark left them. The Doukhobors had no established church either, but instead had a meeting house in which was a table laid with bread, salt and water (see *al-Bayādir* section above) and were wary of outsiders attempting to make contact with their community, principally because they believed they had to concentrate on their faithful mission in life: working the soil and staying faithful and true to God's word, not to any organised establishment on the earth.<sup>240</sup>

Secondly, and as something of a consequence of having no church, the Doukhor society has no position of a priest. God exists within each member of the Doukhor community, and so no priest is needed for mediation with God:

It is the belief in the immanence of God, in the presence within each man of the Christ spirit, which not merely renders priesthood unnecessary, since each man is his own priest in direct contact with the divine, but also makes the Bible obsolete, since every man can be guided, if only he will listen to it, by the voice within.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Harry B. Hawthorn (ed.), *The Doukhobors of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Dent, 1955), p.168.

<sup>240</sup> Woodcock and Avakumovic, op. cit.

<sup>241</sup> Woodcock and Avakumovic, op. cit., p.19.

Conceptually, here, we can draw an allusion between the Doukhobors and the Mirdād community in their rejection of hierarchies and belief in communal wealth and universal spiritual capacity:

When God the unutterable uttered you forth, He uttered forth Himself in you. Thus you, too, are unutterable.

No fraction of Himself did God endow you with,—for He is infractionable; but with His godhood entire, indivisible, unspeakable did He endow you all. What greater heritage can you aspire to have? And who, or what, can hinder you from coming thereinto except your own timidity and blindness?<sup>242</sup>

There are, however, leaders in Doukhobor communities, as the author goes on to explain. Their election, or rather recognition, comes about as a communal acknowledgment of his gifts – something very similar to the way that Mirdād is recognised as a uniquely insightful being in *Mirdād*:

All men have a spark of the divine within them, but in some the spark is magnified so that they become manifestations of deity. According to Doukhobor thought, the historical Christ was one of a progression; there are always Christs on earth, and among them are the Doukhobor leaders. [...] The leader is not a priest; he has no liturgical function. Rather he is a prophet whose visions and intuitions, however irrational they may seem, are regarded as more penetrating than those of other men.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> *The Book of Mirdād*, p.78.

<sup>243</sup> Woodcock and Avakumovic, op. cit., p.22.

Mirdād certainly fits this description amongst the community on Altar Peak. Like Jesus, he rises from humble beginnings and takes some time to be recognised as the leader in the community, even though he, like the Doukhobors, speaks out against authority:

I say to you, Shamadam, and to all, The servant is the master's master. The master is the servant's servant. Let not the servant bow his head. Let not the master raise it high. Crush out the deadly master's pride. Root out the shameful servant's shame.<sup>244</sup>

Mirdād's myriad lectures that take place without warning, often after many weeks spent in silence, typify the teachings of many Abrahamic religious prophets<sup>245</sup> whose wise homilies tend to come in sudden, fluent eruptions, and not in steady streams over long passages of time.<sup>246</sup> Amongst many people, all of whom could be said to have derived from a drop of divine semen,<sup>247</sup> Mirdād is certainly regarded as having more penetrating visions and is capable of persuading his fellow community members more successfully than any other character.

Thirdly, the community on Altar Peak is based around an oral tradition. In spite of the importance of the book being presented to the climber-narrator at the end of the first part and the fact that the second part is meant to be the collection of the teachings of Mirdād in book form, the actual community is centred around the spoken, not the written, word. Mirdād teaches the

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<sup>244</sup> *The Book of Mirdād*, p.52.

<sup>245</sup> Such as the teachings of Jesus, or the ḥadīth tradition of the prophet Muḥammad.

<sup>246</sup> When Mirdād begins his homily on p.37 it is the first time he has spoken in seven years.

<sup>247</sup> A belief expressed by Naimy in *Naḥnu aḥsan am ābā'una?* (Are We or Our Parents Better?), from *Ṣaut al-'ālam* (pp.332-3): 'Humanity, in my opinion, is a drop of divine semen [...]. And this drop contains all the divine powers, from omniscience to omnipotence, [...] just as any seed contains all the attributes of the plant that produced it.'

importance of conversion, but also warns of the perils of words said in spite or haste:

Speak to relieve the speechless. Be speechless to relieve yourselves.

Words are vessels that ply the seas of Space and touch at many ports. Take care as to what you load them with; for having run their course, they shall ultimately discharge their cargo at your gate.<sup>248</sup>

The connotations of an oral community – one in which printed matter is secondary to oral traditions in narrative traditions<sup>249</sup> – are seen in its opposition to all standardised authority and in the importance it places upon communal gatherings. For the Doukhobors, like the community on Altar Peak, the written word does not solely signify the authority of an external body, as they would have to put their trust in publications whose authors they can not know and therefore would not be able to trust their judgment and wisdom, it also represents a source of wisdom that is fixed, static and non-negotiable. This is why the Doukhobors came to dismiss authority in general, because the supreme arbiter of human affairs, that is God, existed inside of all of their selves, rather than in a printed, written tradition. They even chose to dismiss the Bible as part of that authoritarian tradition and revelled in the institution of ‘The Living Book,’ which had the added benefit of making their customs largely incomprehensible to outsiders and further cementing the privileged bonds between the members:

The corpus of psalms and hymns was called ‘The Living Book,’ since it was constantly growing and changing according to the experiences of

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<sup>248</sup> *The Book of Mirdād*, p.192.

<sup>249</sup> See, for example, Peter Seitel, *The Powers of Genre: Interpreting Haya Oral Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1999).

the sect, in contrast to the Bible, which represented, in Doukhobor eyes, the frozen wisdom of a past age. The very possession of scriptures not preserved in writing, and therefore not easily accessible to non-members of the sect, enhanced the Doukhobor feeling of being a special people, isolated by their beliefs and their experiences from the rest of Christendom.<sup>250</sup>

What strikes the reader is the special position that is enjoyed by members of the Doukhobor and Mirdād communities, that of having particular, divine knowledge which has been entrusted to them alone, which separates them from the rest of humanity. This point is touched upon by Mirdād who does not see preaching to congregations as the important part of their work:

The seed of Truth is in all men and things. Your work is not to sow the Truth, but to prepare the favoring season for its springing up.<sup>251</sup>

The Doukhobors were fiercely proud of this isolation and discouraged education, so that its members may not be able to write and publish their secrets to the outside world.<sup>252</sup> The community on Altar Peak is similarly insular and protective of its seedbed for propagating wisdom. That is, until the verbal eruption of Mirdād, who calls for a different relationship with the outside world and whose youngest companion, Naronda, produces the printed volume of the community's beliefs for potentially everyone to read and understand. It is Naimy's final Bloomian swerve away from the influence of the Doukhobors and Tolstoy's veneration of the illiterate, pure Christian devotion of the

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<sup>250</sup> Woodcock and Avakumovic, op. cit., p.22.

<sup>251</sup> *The Book of Mirdād*, p.143, from chapter 27 entitled, 'Should truth be preached to all, or to the chosen few?'

<sup>252</sup> See Woodcock and Avakumovic, who mention their obscure origins and the lack of written histories due to the isolationism of the Doukhobors, op. cit., ch.1.

peasantry. In *Mirdād*, Naimy takes many of the elements of Christianity that exist in Tolstoy's teachings and in the conventions of the Doukhobors, then inverted them by making them available to anyone with access to the book.

## Conclusion

While Naimy may have believed that the reader could discover all they wanted to know about his views on spiritualism and God from a reading of *Mirdād*, his other essays and fiction provide insights into his religious beliefs that not even Naimy might have realised.<sup>253</sup> Nevertheless, *Mirdād* provides a fascinating account of some of the truths that Naimy held to be essential to his *Weltanschauung*; but we must remember that Naimy negotiated his spiritual expression between two bodies of works: fictional texts, such as *Mirdād* and *Muḏakkirāt al-'arqaš*, and his intellectual essays which were usually positioned in and reflective of the world around him.

Before Russia, or 'Little Russia' (present-day Ukraine), came Nazareth and it seems that the experience of treading on the paths of Jesus had an uncommon effect on Naimy. Living and studying in the same town where Jesus spent his childhood, very close to other sites of biblical significance (such as Cana and Galilee), obviously had a profound effect on Naimy as he discusses at length in his autobiography, *Sab'ūn*:

The deep religious feeling which I carried in me from the foot of Mount Sannin had started to become ever deeper in Nazareth. While we were out on a short excursion or a long journey, I would find myself

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<sup>253</sup> See Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1983).

suddenly detached both from myself and from my companions as I imagined Christ and His disciples walking on the road which we ourselves were treading, or as I imagined Him sitting alone and in a state of spiritual abandonment under this tree or by that rock.<sup>254</sup>

The introduction of Russian literature into Naimy's mindset at this stage is critical; not only the writing of the two giants of Russian literature, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, but also the spiritual beauty of a writer such as Lermontov, have a kind of compound epiphany effect on the young Naimy, which made him more resistant to the urban-focused Modernist trend in Russian literature blossoming at the time of his study in Poltava. Suddenly, he can read works which reflect the kind of ideas that he had been formulating during his adolescent years in Nazareth. It is Tolstoy's later essays, however, which are elemental in moulding Naimy's approach to religion – from that point he understands that it is possible to combine the teachings of Jesus with the best aspects of the other world religions, while at the same time discarding the church for its apparent skewing of Christ's teaching. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, brought the personal experience of Christ into the lives of real people with real, and often extremely serious, problems. It is perhaps this coupling of the religious with the social and real that lies at the heart of Naimy's attitude to religion.

For Naimy, the teachings of Tolstoy and the example laid out by the Doukhobors was extremely useful for and relevant to his formulation of the theory of the godhead and of theosis. But Tolstoy was cosseted away from the rest of humanity by his wealth and status. Regardless of the validity of his

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<sup>254</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.182.

religious opinions and his clearly inspirational writings, he still lived the majority of his life on an idyllic estate in rural Russia and dealt with the world's problems purely through correspondence. Even his example laid down by working the land with the peasants and donning their garb in imitation was tempered by the fact that he lived in the luxurious setting of the estate house and would never have to face the same financial or subsistence worries that plagued the peasants.

Dostoevsky differed from Tolstoy in both his attitude to Christianity and his circumstances. He famously said that if forced to choose between Jesus and truth, he would choose Jesus.<sup>255</sup> His uncompromising, fundamental attitude towards Christianity meant that any adaptation of his beliefs in order to accommodate other religions was clearly impossible; Dostoevskyan characters are therefore forced to choose between death and redemption when faced with the possibility of their destruction. But Dostoevsky's circumstances were markedly different to those of Tolstoy. His proximity to the marginal spaces of urban life where morality was often non-existent and degradation common and expected resulted in his belief that humanity needed an unchanging, sturdy foundation upon which to build its redemption. That it could be wrong was not permissible as it represented the only salvation for people who had no other means of steering their lives.

Naimy, however, maintained an astute political awareness and employed religion in a practical way to face the social problems that he saw all around him in the Arab world. That he should have continued to write for journals

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<sup>255</sup> Dostoevsky to N. D. Fon-Vizina. February 1854. F. M. Dostoevsky, *Pis'ma*, ed. A. S. Dolinin (Moscow and Leningrad, 1928) 1:142 (quoted in Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

such as *at-Ṭarīq*, a communist leaning journal that combined literature with socio-political commentaries from leading socialist thinkers from all over the world, was proof that Naimy was no aloof hermit, philosophising in his grotto and not taking an interest in his wider society. We find therefore in his literary works that the undercurrent of religion passes through every short story portraying the facets of daily life in Lebanon, and that it is the source for his ability to find traces of humanity within every given situation. For Naimy essentially saw religion, a holistic attitude towards the godhead and the universal system of the cosmos, as the answer to the problems of the world that inspired his literary works. It was a highly idealistic stance, but one that remained consistent from his intellectual essays through to *Mirdād*.

## Chapter Two

# **The Rising Arab East – A Geopolitical Dilemma at the Heart of Naimy’s Essays, Drama and Fiction**

## **Introduction**

Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), asserted that no matter to where the individual may retreat in order to escape the ubiquitous grasp of politics, no single text can escape the fact that it is, by virtue of its existence in society and history, in some way reflective of the environment that produces it:

To imagine that, sheltered from the omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social, there already exists a realm of freedom – whether it be that of the microscopic experience of words in a text or the ecstasies and intensities of the various private religions – is only to strengthen the grip of Necessity over all such blind zones in which the individual subject seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation. The only effective liberation from such constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is “in the last analysis” political.<sup>256</sup>

While Jameson’s viewpoint can lead to reductive readings of literary texts if we take the presence of a political foundation in all texts as axiomatic, his argument for the prioritising of political readings of texts and the necessary

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<sup>256</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.4-5.

acknowledgment of a political context to most, if not all, writings brings to our attention the point that few such political readings of Naimy's works exist, especially the theosophically-based intellectual essays and novels that would carry the charge of seeking refuge in individual salvation. Jameson's final supposition, 'everything is "in the last analysis" political,' provokes us to reconsider how we might approach Naimy's works without pursuing such a reductive conclusion. By adopting a position where the notion that a writer can divorce themselves from all politics is untenable, we can see that both Naimy's writings are conceived and accomplished on a political substructure and our readings of Naimy's literary works are governed by political coordinates: a political foundation that includes, as Jameson says, both the social and the historical.

Nadeem Naimy's otherwise perceptive analysis of Mikhail Naimy's life and works betrays a sentiment common amongst critics that when Naimy returned to Lebanon after New York, both he and his writings became somehow disengaged from the political world:

His [Mikhail's] utter devotion to the cultivation of his inner life has increasingly both immunized and antagonized him in every other respect against the challenging and novel impact of the world without and fostered within him a feeling of intellectual self-sufficiency. Viewing things through the eyes of a convinced mystic, he has come to feel that the type of world he retired from can have little or nothing to teach him, while he has everything to teach both himself and that world.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Naimy, (1967), p.223.

Standing out from the above quotation is the phrase ‘convinced mystic.’ As we have already seen in the first chapter, Naimy remained somewhat short of convinced (and of being convincing) in his mysticism. In spite of his aspirations towards spiritual detachment from the physical world around him, Naimy remained rooted in the political realities of the Arab world vis-à-vis the global, socio-political hierarchy, as should become evident during our analysis.

More pertinently, however, Nadeem does not recognise, as we shall elucidate further during the course of this chapter, that all of Mikhail Naimy’s works are “in the last analysis” products of history: global political events and processes involved Naimy from his earliest memories to his final books and these were, by common academic consent, some of the most tumultuous events of the twentieth century.<sup>258</sup> Naimy may have retreated to a grotto in Shakhroub in order to write many of his later works,<sup>259</sup> but he still kept his mind focused upon the events unfolding in the rest of the world, as essays from a collection such as *al-Bayādir* inform us.<sup>260</sup>

Undeniably, it is difficult to imagine how Naimy could possibly have lived his life without the overarching shadow of global politics affecting all his literary works and the momentous decisions that forged a direction for his career. Like

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<sup>258</sup> Naimy was ‘fortunate’ enough, from the point of view of literary context, to have lived in Russia (1906-11) in the epoch between the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, served in France during the First World War (1918), lived in New York during the early years of the Great Depression, and witnessed, albeit from a distance, the Second World War.

<sup>259</sup> *Sab’ūn* III, pp.60-7.

<sup>260</sup> Some of the later essays in *al-Bayādir* concern Naimy’s reflections upon the Second World War, including his assessment of the character of Benito Mussolini.

his contemporary, Salāma Mūsā (1887-1958),<sup>261</sup> there is a feeling in their writings that the authors lived through remarkable periods of transition in 'a much disturbed area of the world.'<sup>262</sup> Although Naimy's childhood home village, Baskinta, by virtue of its geographical and linguistic isolation high up in the Lebanese mountainside, remained physically removed from the ideological conflicts and diplomatic processes that took place in the Arab world all around it, his childhood and youth were dominated by the spectre of great, national forces at work for their own interests. The primary, and arguably the most important in terms of literature, foreign nation to make its influence felt upon the life of Mikhail Naimy was Russia.

For this reason alone, it seems artificial and disingenuous to separate local and global politics when discussing the political unconscious at work in Naimy's literary texts, as, for Naimy as for surely most Levantine Arabs in the late nineteenth century, matters of local consideration as basic as the schooling of their children often had wider, international implications. As the Ottoman Empire began to disintegrate as a single political and geographical entity in the era leading up to the First World War, the Levant, began to resemble a diplomatic battleground for the competing interests of European powers.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Salāma Mūsā, like a notable portion of the Arab populace born in the nineteenth century (see A.E. Krimskii, *Pis'ma iz Livana* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka" Glavnaya Redaktsiya Vostochnoi Literaturi, 1975) on this point), was unsure of his birth date. 'Most probably I was born in 1887,' he surmises in his autobiography, *The Education of Salāma Mūsā*, trans. L. O. Schuman (Leiden: Brill, 1961), p.13. Naimy was born two years later.

<sup>262</sup> By this, Mūsā means Egypt, but his references to the main cause for the widespread disturbance, European imperialism, could equally be applied to Lebanon.

<sup>263</sup> Hopwood (1969) has dealt with how Russia exerted its influence in Syria and Palestine from 1843 onwards; A. J. P. Taylor gives an overview of how European diplomatic interactions led to the First World War in *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918* (Oxford: OUP, 1977), including foreign views of the Ottoman Empire; while M. Şükrü Hanioglu gives an internal view of the empire's decline in *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: PUP, 2008).

We have stated already how Russia saw the activities of the IOPS in the Levant as an extension of its own expansionist ambitions south of the Black Sea, but this chapter will not try to relate the political movements between the individual empires that took an active interest in North Africa and the Middle East in the twentieth century. Instead, the broader political context of the twentieth century – the age of modernity and the devastation of two world wars – should be kept in mind as we try to establish how Naimy viewed the emerging Arab world, and how his knowledge and understanding of Russia and Russian literature helped him to interpret the political and economic world around him.

When analysing the political nature of Naimy's literary texts the reader should not look simply to decipher the often esoteric nature of his writing, but instead assess the context that produced his prose – prose that often sought unsuccessfully to divorce the writer from the realities of the real world. It is also context to which we must look to scrutinise Naimy's reading of Russian literature, for, as we shall expound later, his reading of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, et al., informs his own writing and ideas in a dialogic process. Addressing this necessary point of literary interpretation in his critique of Althusserian Marxism, Jameson goes on to pose the provocative question to the reader:

[I]s the text a free-floating object in its own right, or does it “reflect” some context or ground, and in that case does it simply replicate the latter ideologically, or does it possess some autonomous force in which it could be seen as negating that context?<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>264</sup> Jameson, op. cit., p.23.

The answer to Jameson's question, as he explains on the following page, is to be found in mediation between the interpretations and the text, having presumed that all literary texts "reflect" and dialogize with the context in which they were written.<sup>265</sup>

It is precisely this approach that we shall use in order to interpret Naimy's political expressions and readings of Russian literature, one that was formulated by Bakhtin in *The Problem of the Text* with the idea of *heteroglossia*<sup>266</sup> and that texts, or utterances, are linked in chains of literary reflection and communication was further detailed. It is towards these ideas below that we shall incline in our understanding of Naimy's own utterances:

The text as an utterance included in the speech communication (textual chain) of a given sphere. The text as a unique monad that in itself reflects all texts (within the bounds) of a given sphere. The interconnection of all ideas (since all are realized in utterances).<sup>267</sup>

Naimy's own textual chain, I shall argue, that runs from his own plays, essays and novels to the novels and literary criticism of such notable figures in Russian literature as Gogol, Belinsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov highlights an understanding of the world around him, that found more in common with the socio-economic circumstances, which we shall cover in more detail below, that had produced much of the nineteenth-century Russian literature he was

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<sup>265</sup> While I accept some of the arguments that Edward Said puts forward in his essay, 'The Text, the World, the Critic' (The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association, Vol.8, No.2, Autumn, 1975), on the 'worldliness of the text' and its attachment to the specific situation of its creation, I believe that Bakhtin and Todorov provide more convincing arguments on the reader as author and of 'reading as construction' (Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990)). See introduction.

<sup>266</sup> Bakhtin, M. M., *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2004), p.428: 'The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text.'

<sup>267</sup> Bakhtin, M. M., *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2006), pp.104-5.

reading than with classical Arabic literature. Understanding the context of Naimy's literary works is only possible when we start to investigate the dialogue that takes place, that mediates a position, between, say, Belinsky's political unconscious and Naimy's political unconscious. The literary texts that Naimy produced as a result demonstrate his engagement not only with the political events that were happening around him, but also show how he interpreted the context that produced the works of the Russian authors he was choosing to read.

Finally, we must acknowledge that in seeking to define himself through his literary works, Naimy was also actively involved in the construction of an Arab identity and a particular literary expression of the Arab world in which his texts were widely read.<sup>268</sup> From the earliest essays that he wrote, the critical pieces for the journal *al-Funūn* that formed the collection *al-Ġirbāl*, Naimy understood that when he wrote about the state of Arabic literature, he was writing about more than the written word. However, Naimy transcends Jameson's observations on the nature of the text written in third world countries<sup>269</sup> by writing beyond allegory and setting his literary essays on a global platform. In this context, we must reiterate Naimy's opinion that Arabic literature remained in a dark age where its only small window looked to the past. Naimy was eager to develop Arabic literature's usefulness in the modern era by introducing it to the intellect and skill of Russian literature, thus managing to create in the merging process a new Arabic literature that not only would

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<sup>268</sup> As we shall see in the criticism chapter, Naimy's first critical collection, *al-Ġirbāl*, was especially well received in Egypt and the Egyptian critic, 'Abbas al-'Aqqād, wrote a eulogistic introductory essay to its first edition.

<sup>269</sup> Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' (*Social Text* (No.15, Autumn, 1986).

reflect more adequately the Arab world in which it was formed, but that could also become a significant contributing force in the global literary sphere.

Therein lies the essential political dilemma present in Naimy's works, for although he may have come to argue against the false construct of national borders in his intellectual essays, imagining an idealistic world in which everyone would seek to fulfil their divine potential and become a godhead, Naimy's short stories in particular present to the reader a plethora of characters whose concerns roughly coincide, whose economically inferior status is shared,<sup>270</sup> and in the minds of whom live the image of their community.<sup>271</sup> Naimy always constructed these characters, whether they were in his short stories, the play *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, or, for instance, his novel *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, as members of a community that defined itself through its otherness:<sup>272</sup> the Lebanese community figures, for instance, in New York short stories are brought into sharper relief for the reader by the very fact that they exist in the centre of a homogenised American backdrop. This very political act is easiest to trace in terms of constructed communities when we look at his short stories and drama,<sup>273</sup> but the matter is problematised when we consider Naimy's intellectual essays, as the writer's focus shifts away from the local towards a universal theory of humankind. Nevertheless, the political unconscious provides in both cases a directing force in his writing, motivating

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<sup>270</sup> The word 'subaltern' has been problematised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and may be inappropriate here. However, as we shall see, there is a clear sense of hierarchy and western hegemony in many of Naimy's fictional works.

<sup>271</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), p.6.

<sup>272</sup> 'Other' as defined in post-colonial studies; see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>273</sup> There is a clear sense of a community of Lebanese émigrés in Naimy's short stories, as we shall discover.

and inspiring his poetics and dialectics, and his choice of subject matter. It is this force whose power we shall attempt to chart throughout the course of this chapter as it mutates from early encounters with the global economy recorded in the primary chapters of *Sab'ūn*, through the local concerns of Arabs portrayed in the play of national allegory which is *Al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, until it evolves into the universal, conceptual entity that is *Mirdād*.

### **Political and Economic Commentary in Childhood Autobiography**

Every author of an autobiography must have had some kind of motivation underlying his decision to tell the world about himself. [...]

One of the aspects that make autobiography a genre apart presupposes both its subject and object to be "I" (or as Ahmad Amin put it: "I am the displayer and displayed"), a condition provided by one's personal experience, one's internal transformation. Therefore, the autobiographer relates both what has happened to him in the described span of time and how he has changed himself to become his present self.<sup>274</sup>

In the previous chapter on Naimy's spiritual expressions, we began with an examination of one of the earliest memories from his childhood: that of kneeling beside his bed with his mother and saying prayers for his father and other family members who were working in the United States of America. It is at the same point that we must start for an analysis of Naimy's political inclinations and a critique of how they were expressed through his writings.

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<sup>274</sup> Sergei A. Shuiskii, 'Some Observations on Modern Arabic Autobiography' (Journal of Arabic Literature, vol.13 (1982), p.112).

That the analyses of both his political ideas and his religious leanings should begin at the same place is not accidental, for as we shall see, politics and religion became intertwined in Naimy's *Weltanschauung*, which found a verbal articulation through several of his later literary works.

Reciting the prayers for his father as a child in Baskinta, Naimy was unconsciously recognising a fundamental economic truth of the community in which he grew up: that of the miserable poverty of rural life in Mount Lebanon, an isolated pocket of the Ottoman Empire. Taken as a constructed image of life in Baskinta, the text portrays for us a picture of a family who eke out a living with subsistence agriculture and who have had to take the radical option of exile in order to supplement their income. As the first memory to take form in his autobiography *Sab'ūn*, Naimy acknowledged the pivotal nature of this particular feature of his early life. Naimy's memory of the Christian prayers invoking God to furnish his father with gold<sup>275</sup> form the starting point for his description of himself and, to echo Shuiskii, how he achieved a transformation over seventy years in the volumes *Sab'ūn*.

That Naimy should make the absence and return of his father an early narrative fulcrum in his autobiography seems appropriate for a writer for whom Tolstoy remained the strongest presence in his writing for the duration of his life, as Tolstoy's contemplations on the nature of the family form an essential feature of his novels.<sup>276</sup> By contrast, other Arab writers noted for their autobiographies are inexact about their earliest childhood memories,

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<sup>275</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.19.

<sup>276</sup> There is a tendency in literary autobiographical writing to concentrate on childhood and adolescence. See Burton Pike's article 'Autobiography and Time' (*Comparative Literature*, Vol.28, No.4 (Autumn, 1976)) for more on the rhetoric and style of autobiography as a genre.

deliberately using their prose to depict the ethereal nature of past times, as this example from Naimy's contemporary, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889-1973), shows:

As much as he could reckon of the time of day, it was either dawn or dusk. This was likely because he remembers feeling at that time something of a light, cold breeze on his face that the heat of the sun had not dissipated. And it is also likely that, regardless of his ignorance of whether it was truly light or dark, he remembers upon leaving the house encountering mild, delicate, gentle light as if darkness draped its borders.<sup>277</sup>

Salāma Mūsā departs from this hazy, uncertain manner of evoking a particular time in his childhood by creating for the reader a kind of literary jigsaw, tropes from his Arab childhood fixed together to form a conceptual milieu:

I have ridden on a donkey's back from the station of Cairo to Abdin, and I have seen the buffalo-cow coming each morning from the farmstead to our house in Zagazig to be milked and then disappear again. Once I was struck by my sister because I had called her by her name in the street; it was fashionable that girls' names should not be known about.<sup>278</sup>

Mūsā continues to draw into the reader's frame references to notable events that incrementally construct a picture of late nineteenth-century Arab life. Departing from the above forms, Naimy chose a matter of ritual as his

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<sup>277</sup> Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *al-Ayyām*, (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1996), p.3.

<sup>278</sup> Salāma Mūsā, *The Education of Salāma Mūsā*, trans. L.O. Schuman (Leiden: Brill, 1961), p.7.

earliest childhood memory: the repeating of prayers to a man of whom he would presumably have had no conscious memory at that stage of his life.<sup>279</sup>

Naimy's conveyance of this childhood memory exhibits his reading of Tolstoy's earliest work *Detstvo* (Childhood). In his novella, part of a trilogy entitled *Detstvo, Otrochestvo, Yunost'* (Childhood, Boyhood, Youth),<sup>280</sup> Tolstoy recounts the death of his mother and the conflict between the genuine, confused emotions her death stirred in him and the seemingly affected emotions Marya Ivanovna (Mimi) puts on for display at the funeral.<sup>281</sup> Naimy reinvents the context and articulates the troubled emotions of his childhood self and the confused sense of loss in a dialogue with Tolstoy's work, and thus demonstrates his reception of Tolstoy through his own work.

Tolstoy's descriptions of his childhood world in the narrative are, like Naimy's, very exact and combine the child's perspective with the viewpoint of the adult narrator. However, all the Arabic works contrast starkly with Tolstoy's Russian text through their construction of the Arab world in their childhood. We see countries where the world is viewed through economic terms and the Arab world is demarcated by its relative poverty to the West.<sup>282</sup> Unpacking how Naimy reacted to this hierarchy between the Arab world and the West shall occupy much of the rest of this chapter.

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<sup>279</sup> See quotation from *Sab'ūn I* on p.23 above. Naimy's father left for the USA when Mikhail was only ten months old (Nadeem Naimy, op. cit., p.71).

<sup>280</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (London: Penguin, 1964).

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-5.

<sup>282</sup> Furthermore, all three authors (Naimy, Mūsā and Ḥusayn) make the contrast between the Arab world and the West evident through the rest of their narratives, which all involve their residences in and reactions to western nations.

## Baskinta's Place in the World Through Naimy's Eyes

Although not expressed in political macro-economic terms, Baskinta and Shakroub's lack of industry and meagre opportunities for the families of the region to make a modest living for themselves must be seen in terms of a wider context in which successive imperial administrations (Ottoman, French and British) took the land as their own for colonial exploitation, but failed to invest capital in the region for the welfare of some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society in the regions.<sup>283</sup> This historical context of the subject matter of Naimy's autobiography, one of oppression of the Arabs and the poverty that resulted from isolation, is closely mirrored by the political context surrounding the period in which he wrote the work: although Naimy is rarely explicit about the events of *an-Nakbah* in 1948,<sup>284</sup> the political circumstances surrounding Naimy's writing of *Sab'ūn*, just twelve years later in 1960, comprised decolonisation, growing nationalist feeling, unrest, civil war and defence of Arab interests across a wide area, but centring mainly on Egypt, Israel and Lebanon. The Suez Crisis, revolution<sup>285</sup> and civil war in Lebanon and the creation of two United Arab Republics all fed into the consciousness of Naimy as he wrote his autobiography, helping to mould his view of the past.

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<sup>283</sup> See Traboulsi (2007), ch.3.

<sup>284</sup> Naimy makes an oblique reference to the diplomatic events leading up to the creation of Israel in *Sab'ūn* III, p.133: 'And there was something even more calamitous than that. It was the Balfour Declaration. The Balfour Declaration proclaimed that a stranger enter a house occupied by its inhabitants, and that he enter it by force and with the armed support of the British king to tell later to the inhabitants: "Do not worry. The house will remain yours, but it will be my 'national' home and nothing more."'

<sup>285</sup> The 'Rosewater Revolution' took place in 1952 at the end of Bishara Khoury's presidency (1943-52): Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon: a History of the Internationalization of Human Contact* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p.104.

Autobiographies are set out as a series of significant junctions in the writer's life, points which help to form a narrative that maps out the development of the writer from their earliest memories to the point where they 'become their present self.'<sup>286</sup> A pivotal event for Naimy is winning a scholarship to study at the Nazareth Seminary and the effect this had upon his world outlook, described by Nadeem Naimy in terms of a bird making its first perilous fledge:

In December 1902 Naimy emerged from his nest perched at the foot of Mount Sannin for the first time in his life. He descended with the muleteers down the Valley of the Skulls to distant Beirut, where he was to take a small boat to Haifa, and then a donkey to Nazareth. Twelve years old, alone, and with barely six shillings in his pocket, Naimy set off on his journey.<sup>287</sup>

The undertone of Baskinta being a tiny, parochial village, miles away from the Lebanese capital, serves to remind the reader of its proportionate size to the rest of the world. Naimy's literary texts persistently convey Baskinta's isolation and use it as a metaphor to depict a time and place relatively unsullied by the worst excesses of capitalism and modernity.<sup>288</sup> However, Naimy sometimes adopts a dichotomous stance towards Baskinta by both reminding the reader that it is a backwater isolated from the trends of the modern world, whilst raging against the conservative resignation its residents

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<sup>286</sup> See also Burton Pike on this issue (op. cit.): 'The autobiographer sees his life as a somehow coherent identity, a line which begins with his birth and runs up to the present of writing.'

<sup>287</sup> Nadeem Naimy, op. cit., p.76.

<sup>288</sup> There are notable exceptions to this trend, however, and one of them, Naimy's short story, *Sa'adat "al-bēg"*, shall be discussed in more detail below.

feel about their role in life. To emphasize this point, Naimy relates how his father was stopped by an acquaintance:

This man had poured scorn on me in the middle of a conversation and said to my father: 'It would be best for that son of yours in Nazareth to come home and till the soil with you in Shakroub. Nothing will come of his work there. You would sooner get a straight stick from hawthorn than the Naimy family would produce a celebrity!'<sup>289</sup>

That Naimy ought not to have grandiose ideas about ambition beyond what was expected of him (by the acquaintance and, by extension, Baskinta) is indicative of this conservatism and reveals how Naimy viewed Arab societal constructs at work in his home village. In the short story *Sa'adat "al-bēg"*, this trope is inverted and used to satirise the type of rural Arab society from which Naimy came.

### **The Importance of Anṭūn Ballān for Naimy's Vision**

Superseding this episode in terms of significance for the evolution of Naimy into a writer with an acute sense of the unjust outcomes of global politics and economics and who used Russian literature to articulate its injustices, however, is his meeting with a teacher who would become one of the most essential personal influences in his life and works: Anṭūn Ballān.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.206.

<sup>290</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, pp.205-9.

After also graduating from the Nazareth Seminary, Ballān also was invited to study in Russia at Kazan State University<sup>291</sup> by the IOPS. When he returned to the Levant, Ballān then proceeded to teach Russian language and literature with the fervour and excitement of someone who not only excelled academically in the subjects, but who also had a profound love for them.<sup>292</sup> We have already seen how Naimy was infected by such enthusiasm for Russian literature,<sup>293</sup> and how grateful Naimy had been to his teacher for the inspiration.<sup>294</sup>

Naimy's lessons with Ballān seem to have been something of an epiphany as Ballān not only instilled a love of Russian literature in the young student, but also a new understanding of the political oppression that existed all around him:

More importantly, Anṭūn was the first teacher to bring state affairs to our attention. Whenever the opportunity presented itself, he would tell us about the misery our country sustains under the Turkish yoke, the tyranny of 'Abd al-Ḥamīd, the crimes of the Bosphorus, and the widespread corruption in political arenas from the sultan right down to the last mayor in the last village.<sup>295</sup>

Ballān employed both of these interests in the pieces he wrote for Ḳalīl Baydas' journal *an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah*.<sup>296</sup> Baydas, also an alumnus of the

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<sup>291</sup> Now called Kazanskii federalnii universitet (Kazan Federal University), Kazan State University is the modern manifestation of the University of Kazan, where Leo Tolstoy studied law and oriental languages from 1844-47.

<sup>292</sup> Abu Hanna (2005), pp.11-20.

<sup>293</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, pp.207.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*: 'Blessings be upon you, Anṭūn Ballān!'

<sup>295</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.208-9.

<sup>296</sup> *An-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah*, Haifa and Jerusalem, 1908-23 (Jewish National and University Library).

Nazareth Seminary and a former teacher of Naimy in Baskinta, established his journal in order to bring to the Arab reading public's attention the genius of Russian literature and also to be a mouthpiece for his anti-imperialist views. The former was achieved by publishing translations of Russian short stories,<sup>297</sup> written by alumni and teachers of the Nazareth and Beit Jala seminaries.<sup>298</sup> Baydas' anti-imperialistic views were made more explicit in the later years of the journal, particularly in a piece describing his imprisonment for political activities in 1923, but frequently they would combine with translations of Russian works.<sup>299</sup> Ballān's own contributions to *an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* betrayed both his great interest in the works of Tolstoy, particularly with his later religious works, as Ballān's original piece, 'Amal Allāh (The Work of God), displays,<sup>300</sup> and his commitment to social justice. Furthermore, Ballān also printed his translation of the Tolstoy work *Semeinoye shast'ye* (Family Happiness) in 1915 and a collection of short stories by Tolstoy in 1922, called in Arabic *Rawā'ī' al-ḳayāl* (Masterpieces of Fiction),<sup>301</sup> and embarked upon his own literary journal shaped in the model of *an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah*. *Hims* was named after Ballān's own home town in Syria and featured more translations of Tolstoy by Ballān.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Usually anonymous as regards the original author of the piece, the short stories would simply be described as *min al-russiya* (from the Russian) to indicate their origin.

<sup>298</sup> One of the alumni of the Beit Jala Seminary for girls who contributed to *an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* was Kulthum 'Oud, later to become a colleague of Ignaty Kratchkovsky and a professor of Arabic in the USSR (see *an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* (5/II, 1910)).

<sup>299</sup> Such as *Peter the Great and His Wife* (*Butrus al-akbar wa zaujatuhu*), which advocated morality over bureaucracy (*an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* (13/I, 1909)).

<sup>300</sup> *An-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* (7/II, 1910): it tells the story of how Tolstoy met with a group of peasants and discussed the notion of God and how it is to be found in the nature that surrounds you.

<sup>301</sup> Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* (Boulder, CO: Three Continents, 1997), pp.102-3.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*

### Naimy's Political Directions in Poltava

Naimy, therefore, learnt Russian language and literature at Nazareth under a teacher who was highly motivated by his subjects. Naimy took his appetite for Russian literature, aroused in him at Nazareth by a man whose championing of the oppressed had left an indelible mark on Naimy, to Poltava, where, by his own admission, he proceeded to devour Russian literature at a remarkable rate. As he says in his diary from the period, Naimy not only wanted to read the literature. His ambition exceeded that goal:

I live today in a world screaming with sundry desires and I had a terrible greed to sample all that was new and beautiful in it. Some of my friends played the violin or guitar or mandolin or 'balalaika,' and they would gather around them these melodious voices and proceed to sing their captivating Ukrainian songs; and I wanted to play how they played, and sing as they sang.<sup>303</sup>

Naimy's diaries from this period, written in Russian as he was inspired to do so by Ivan Savvich Nikitin's work *Dnyevnik seminarista* (Diary of a Seminarist),<sup>304</sup> detail the works of Russian literature that he was digesting and enjoying during his time at the seminary. From this vital piece of evidence, we are able to gain a full picture of the works that Naimy chose to read and why he directed his intellectual faculties towards this particular period of Russian literature.<sup>305</sup> Thus, we read of how Naimy was enchanted almost to distraction

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<sup>303</sup> *Sab'un* I, p.265.

<sup>304</sup> *Sab'un* I, p.271. Nikitin's work details his education in a seminary and the embryonic formation of his poetic skills, something with which Naimy empathised: I. S. Nikitin, *Polnoe sobraniye sochineniy, tom III* (Petrograd: Literaturno-izdatel'sky otdel komissarita narodnovo prosvyashcheniya, 1918), pp.3-126.

<sup>305</sup> Necessarily, this has to be a truncated account, particularly as many of the authors Naimy read (e.g. Pisarev and Ostrovsky) will be unfamiliar to most readers outside Russia.

by the poetry of Lermontov,<sup>306</sup> how he wrestled with the philosophy of *War and Peace*<sup>307</sup> and of how Gogol's prose works elevated the writer, born in Sorochintsy in the Poltava region, to the status of genius in Naimy's mind.<sup>308</sup> By briefly analysing the works that Naimy read in Poltava we can build up a picture of the twin concerns that enveloped his consciousness during his study stay at the seminary.

As we have already noted in the previous chapter, spirituality was an issue at the forefront of his mind and this is reflected in his choice of works by Lermontov and also the later philosophical essays of Tolstoy. Politics, however, and the consequences of political systems that exploit the lowest classes of society are substantial issues in literary works such as Gogol's satirical *Mertvye dushi* (Dead Souls);<sup>309</sup> reading and discussing Gogol in the context of his studentship at the Poltava seminary had convinced Naimy of the importance of debating basal religious questions to Russian rural communities, something that he had experienced himself but was at that time still unaware of how to express in literature. Naimy's admittedly innocent reading of Gogol,<sup>310</sup> especially, demonstrated the impact of using religion, folklore and the poor folk that populated his 'Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka' to communicate literary ideas about good and evil. Evidently, discussing other works was similarly effective intellectually for Naimy: history

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<sup>306</sup> *Sab'un* I, p.272ff.

<sup>307</sup> *Sab'un* I, p.274ff.

<sup>308</sup> *Sab'un* I, p.281ff.

<sup>309</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšintun*, p.75.

<sup>310</sup> This underscores the role of the reader in hermeneutics and literary history as Naimy would not have been aware of modern scholarship on the heavy use of irony and stylization in Gogol's works. See Jauss (1982), esp. pp.22-24.

and the inability of humankind to escape a relentless cycle of bloodshed, followed by brief interludes of cessation of violence, formed the bulk of *War and Peace*, but especially the philosophically-based epilogue in two parts that caused Naimy to mire himself in much intellectual wrestling;<sup>311</sup> while activism in human rights and criticism of the Tsarist regime formed the spine of works by Ukrainian writers such as Taras Shevchenko and Vladimir Korolenko.<sup>312</sup>

The context of Naimy's studentship is highly important when we look at Naimy's choice of reading material. Naimy studied in Poltava from 1906 to 1911, a period of relative proletariat calm between the tumultuous revolution of 1905 and the Lena Goldfield massacre of around a hundred workers in April, 1912.<sup>313</sup> The effects of the 1905 revolution were still fresh in the students' minds, as Naimy recalled later:

I was not in need of proof that a piled-up pyramid had been established, whose firmness and permanency could only be completed by those at the summit. While the 1905 revolution was still fresh in our minds, it was enough for me to hear my comrades discussing it in whispers to know that not everything in the land of the tsars was as good as it could be. Countless times I saw my comrades reading with extreme passion and secrecy illicit copies of censored works, including some works by Tolstoy and the entire corpus of Herzen, Kropotkin, Bakunin and others, secret publications on the French Revolution and

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<sup>311</sup> *Sab'un* I, pp.281-2.

<sup>312</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnūn*, p.176. Naimy also writes an essay on Taras Shevchenko in *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, in which he emphasises the political oppression that overclouded Shevchenko's life as both a serf and exiled convict. Naimy's essay is interesting because he displays a familiarity with contemporary Ukrainian literature (citing Bagritsky and Bazhan amongst others) that he does not often show with contemporary Russian literature.

<sup>313</sup> Reginald E. Zelnik, 'Russian workers and revolution,' from *The Cambridge History of Russia, Vol.2: Imperial Russia, 1689–1917*, Dominic Lieven (ed.) (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), p.634.

on the socialist endeavours associated with it. Many times my comrades and I went on excursions to the countryside where I saw vast fields growing wheat, maize, chard or something else. I would ask, to whom does this belong? They would tell me it belonged to Prince ‘Sherbatov’ or Count such-and-such. I would hear my comrades say, ‘this is wrong, this won’t go on.’<sup>314</sup>

However, nineteenth-century literature and its most notable figures continued to be highly popular and influential because the concerns of their works remained the same as the interests of the early twentieth-century populace: the overbearing oppression of the Tsarist state, the rights of the individual, freedom, equality and justice.<sup>315</sup> Furthermore, tropes and devices used in earlier works were transformed in contemporary novels: such as the social life of Russia portrayed by Tolstoy through the character of Anna Karenina, found itself reinterpreted via a political prism by Maxim Gorky in his 1907 novel *Mat’* (Mother), in which Russia is a mother protecting and nurturing the burgeoning Communist movement.<sup>316</sup> Nevertheless, the provinciality of Poltava together with the conservatism of the seminary ensured that classic nineteenth century Russian literature remained more popular than the contemporaneous urban Modernist literature of St Petersburg and Moscow.

It is clearly documented in *Ab’ad min mūskū wa min wāšintun* how Naimy found himself embroiled in the students’ protest movement, articulating their

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<sup>314</sup> *Ab’ad min mūskū wa min wāšintun*, pp.79-80.

<sup>315</sup> As Evelyn Bristol notes, part of Gorky’s popularity in this period was due to his evocation of Chekhov and Tolstoy: Evelyn Bristol, ‘Turn of a century: modernism, 1895–1925,’ *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, Charles A. Moser (ed.) (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) pp.396-7.

<sup>316</sup> See Richard Freeborn, *The Russian Revolutionary Novel: Turgenev to Pasternak* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), p.74.

dissatisfaction with the rigid regime of the seminary. As stated in the previous chapter (p.30), mirroring the main concerns in his choice of Russian literature, Naimy's speech to the assembled students on the subject of hardships endured at the seminary is imbued with both politics and religion.<sup>317</sup>

Thus, Naimy makes the connection between the political and the religious explicit. But student activism was not the only means by which Naimy demonstrated his commitment to the quest for justice and equality that had become a potent force in the Arab world (and especially Egypt) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,<sup>318</sup> and which Naimy had necessarily reinforced through his reading of Russian classic and contemporary literature in Poltava. Naimy's friendships and excursions while at Poltava are indicative of the mindset of a man who was identifying more with the rural populace of Russia and seeking in his travels a kind of folk representation of the country that seemed to him more genuine, honest and attuned to nature and the universal – in other words, in keeping with his reading of Gogol and Tolstoy. The love of the land translated into a physical attraction to one of its daughters for Naimy:

We became a single family in 'Romany' living under one roof: Varya, Kotya, Alyosha and I. It was becoming harder for me to resist Varya's violent advances; the twin lights of our love burned brighter than

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<sup>317</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnūn*, pp.86-7.

<sup>318</sup> In the wake of Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afḡānī (1839-97) and Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) came a movement of thinkers who concentrated on social and religious reform, and feminism. For more on this important era, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983).

before, and hope renewed itself as it lodged a place in my heart without a struggle.<sup>319</sup>

Naimy, once again, is mirroring the tropes used in his beloved nineteenth-century Russian literature, finding in his Russian country idyll a haven of comradeship and reciprocated love that originated from Naimy's trip to the rural village of Ghira Simovka.<sup>320</sup> There is a general tendency in the classic nineteenth-century literature Naimy was reading to draw on Rousseau's 'city vs. country' dichotomy<sup>321</sup> and to view the urban as somehow sullied and malicious, while in the (Russian) countryside you will find the essence of Russia that is pure, good and simple. We find elements of this expressed, albeit in myriad, problematic ways, in the works of (especially) Tolstoy, Turgenev, Gogol, and Dostoevsky. Although the city / country trope was superseded by a concentration on urban life and complexities in the age of Russian modernism (exemplified more in the literature being translated in the early editions of *al-Funūn*), Naimy continued to encounter the classic dichotomy in the literature he was reading in Poltava and soon reinvented it in an Arab context.

When Naimy returned from Poltava – not as a graduate ready to enter the teaching profession, as his tutors would have hoped,<sup>322</sup> but as a writer just embarking upon his career – he would express his political world-view,

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<sup>319</sup> *Sab'un* I, p.385. To emphasise Naimy's conservative choices in literature detailed above, when he first meets Varya and her husband Kotya he is reading a novel by Grigory Danilevsky (unnamed, but possibly *Sozhzhennaya Moskva* (Moscow Aflame; 1886) as it shared its subject matter, the Napoleonic invasion of 1812, with Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which Naimy had read earlier).

<sup>320</sup> *Sab'un* I, p.299.

<sup>321</sup> See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin, 2004). Rousseau's ideas on Western civilisation are, as we shall see, more relevant to Naimy's fiction, but we may also keep in mind the ideas of Ibn Kaldūn on the *badū* / *hadār* (Bedouin / settled) dichotomy of Arab civilisation.

<sup>322</sup> Hanna (op. cit.), pp.21-8.

constructed during this pivotal time in Nazareth and Poltava, in his literary texts to great effect. It is to one of the first of these works, the highly politically-motivated play *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, to which we shall turn our attention now.

### **Fathers and Sons: The Politics of the Lebanese Family**

Naimy first moved to New York in 1916 at the request of his friend, and editor of *al-Funūn*, Nasīb 'Arīḍa,<sup>323</sup> and it is at this point that he begins to publish his fictional material. When Naimy published his first play the following year in 1917,<sup>324</sup> *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* (Fathers and Sons), he believed that the format was still so radical that his Arab audience would require an essay of introduction to the genre of drama, so as to mitigate any reservations or objections they might have to this strange, new literary expression of realism. In doing so, Naimy was following the example of two of the pioneers of Arabic theatre,<sup>325</sup> Mārūn an-Naqqāš and Kalīl al-Qabbānī, the former of whom had 'thought it wise to introduce his novel work to those unacquainted with the theatre by a speech explaining briefly what drama is and what his intentions are'<sup>326</sup> when he first staged a production of his play, *al-Baḳīl* (The Miser), in his own Beirut house in 1846.

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<sup>323</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, pp.64-77.

<sup>324</sup> *Al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* had been written in 1916 and published in instalments in *al-Funūn* from December 1916 to April 1917, but 1917 saw the first publication of the entire play in book form (New York: Sharikat al-Funūn).

<sup>325</sup> I have followed the definitions outlined by Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis in *Drama/Theatre/Performance* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004) and used the word 'theatre' here rather than 'drama,' as 'theatre' denotes the work, the production, and the building to accommodate the work, as well as the theory behind the work, while 'drama' tends to denote simply the literary text. Therefore, for an-Naqqāš and Naimy, 'theatre' is more appropriate.

<sup>326</sup> M. M. Badawi, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), 'Arabic Drama: Early Developments' by M. M. Badawi, p.331.

By choosing to preface his work with an essay of introduction, in which he questioned the achievements of 'a literary renaissance,'<sup>327</sup> Naimy was keeping his larger Arab audience in mind, as although the theatre had become fairly well established in Egypt by the 1910s with notable authors such as Ibrāhīm Ramzī and Maḥmūd Taymūr writing plays for large audiences, plays from the rest of the Arab world at this time were in remarkably short supply.<sup>328</sup> As Badawi states in his essay on the birth and infancy of modern Arabic drama, the only non-Egyptian play Jacob Landau recognises as good drama in his *Studies in the Arab Theater and Cinema* is *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* itself,<sup>329</sup> but Badawi is sceptical about the play's merits:

*Al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* is really no more than a melodramatic story with an unsatisfactory plot, shallow and unconvincing characterization, excessive abstract discussions and a seriously flawed dialogue in which, instead of opting for either the colloquial or the classical, Nuʿaymah resorts (albeit inconsistently) to the method advocated by Farah Anṭūn, that of making the educated speak in the literary idiom while putting the colloquial in the mouths of the rest, with artificial and at times downright ridiculous results, as when two brothers engaged in a conversation are not made to speak the same language.<sup>330</sup>

Against Badawi's comments, we must point out that Ramzī and Taymūr, writers for the Arabic theatre that had 'reached its maturity,'<sup>331</sup> were building

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<sup>327</sup> Mikhail Naimy, *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* (from *al-Majmū'ah al-kāmilah* (8 vols.), 4<sup>th</sup> vol., Beirut: Dār al-'ilm li-l-mulayin, 1971), vol.4, p.143.

<sup>328</sup> Badawi, op. cit., p.355.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., p.356.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

upon success and evolution of the Arabic theatre genre that had been built by earlier writers such as Faraḥ Anṭūn and Ya'qūb Ṣannū' and their own successes had been cemented and augmented by a system of literary production that can be said to be far more advanced than that of Lebanon. Not only had Egypt developed its own audience over a number of decades, nurturing their tastes and introducing advancements in the genre in piecemeal form so as to allow its maturation, but the Egyptian writers also enjoyed the benefit of a literary network of men of letters, journalists and academics, the reverse 'encouragement' of British authorities who banned certain dramatic works and thus signified the importance of the genre in 'inflaming nationalist feeling,'<sup>332</sup> the establishment of private theatrical companies from the early twenties and official Egyptian state patronage from the late twenties. In contrast, Naimy worked in more of a vacuum with little knowledge of the drama genre and little evidence of theatre having gained a foothold in the Levant.<sup>333</sup> Indeed, he states in *Sab'ūn* that the first time he had witnessed a production at the theatre was when he was studying in Poltava:

I wanted to write a play and perfect the art of the drama after I visited the theatre for the first time in Poltava, and there I saw and heard how plays and actors function. What, then, can I say about the opera, the ballet, of the freedom of unhindered movement between two bodies, in the home, in the street, and in the country?<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., p.342.

<sup>333</sup> Especially as an-Naqqāš had died prematurely at the age of thirty-eight in 1855, and al-Qabbānī had moved to Egypt in 1884.

<sup>334</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.266.

While certain criticisms levelled by Badawi at the play are relevant – Naimy’s characterisation is quite crass and there is a melodramatic sentiment at work in the play – we must view his achievement against the paucity of Arabic drama outside of Egypt and his relative success in introducing the genre to concerns from an unrepresented part of the Arab world.<sup>335</sup> Furthermore, we ought to remember that *al-Ābā’ wa al-banūn* addresses with some success the problem of miscommunication and conflict between generations and can in many ways be said to represent not only Lebanon at the turn of the century, but also any society at any time that tries to accommodate both rigid tradition and a desire to modernise the society that shackles its members.

The basic plot of Naimy’s play follows the turbulence caused when Dāwūd, a teacher who is thirty years old, visits his friend, Ilyās, at his family home in rural Lebanon. While staying at the home, Dāwūd falls in love with Ilyās’ sister, Zinat, and declares his intention to marry her. However, his plans for marriage are scuppered by ‘Umm Ilyās Samāḥah, a stalwart of the old local customs and traditions, who wishes her daughter to climb socially and marry Nāṣif Beg, the idle, drunkard son of Mūsā Beg ‘Arkūš, on account of the fact that he has an enviable title. Therein lies the tension between the older *fathers* (although the chief protagonist is a widowed mother), who wish to preserve the old social order in spite of the misery it may cause people, and the sons, who stand for progress, change and the pursuit of happiness. By virtue of a coincidence, Ilyās falls in love with Dāwūd’s sister, Šahīdah, towards the end of the play and thus creates a neat, if somewhat contrived,

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<sup>335</sup> I refer here to Roger Allen’s (1998) survey of trends in drama in the Arab world outside Egypt that outlines a dearth of published works in the first two decades of the twentieth century (pp.348-57).

conclusion to the drama that unfortunately warrants Badawi's accusations of the plot of *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* being 'unsatisfactory.'

Naimy's summation of his own work in *Sab'ūn* acknowledges the presence in his literary consciousness of Turgenev's work,<sup>336</sup> but simultaneously attempts to underplay the significance of *Otsi i deti* (Fathers and Sons) in the creation of his play:

I wrote the drama *Fathers and Sons* in three weeks. In choosing the title I was fully aware that it was already the name of an acclaimed novel by the Russian writer Turgenev. I see nothing wrong in this. After all, the title is not original; on the contrary, it is perhaps the first thought that comes into the mind of any writer who wants to examine the conflict between two generations. This title is not unlike, say, "Poetry and Poets," "East and West," "Life and Death" and so on. In such situations, where the titles and ideas are similar, what is required is a different approach to the theme. And my approach to the struggle between fathers and sons is entirely different to that of Turgenev in terms of the events, the heroes and the dialogues.<sup>337</sup>

'Entirely different' may be too extreme a phrase for Naimy to use here. What we read instead is a re-imagining of *Fathers and Sons* in which Dāwūd to a large extent plays the same role as that of Bazarov: the principal agitator in a conservative situation that looks likely to adhere to the status quo without

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<sup>336</sup> See Anna Dolinina's essay on Turgenev and Naimy, *Iz istorii rusko-arabskikh literaturnikh svyazey ("Otsi i deti" Mikhail Nuayme)*, in "Zapiski okhotnika" I. S. Turgenyeva (1852-1952): sbornik statyey i materialov (Orel: Izdatel'stvo "Orlovskaya pravda", 1955).

<sup>337</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.69-70.

his interference.<sup>338</sup> However, a key difference is that the narrative of *Fathers and Sons* is built around Bazarov's alarming, Nihilist character, while Dāwūd plays more the role of a facilitator rather than an agitator in the narrative in *Ābā' wa al-banūn*, igniting the chain of events that will lead to a dramatic conflict between the generations of the play.

In discussing the political aspects of both literary texts, it must be stressed that Turgenev wrote his novel for a Russian readership in the nineteenth century; Naimy wrote his play for an Arab audience in the early twentieth century. While fifty five years separate the two works, a vast gulf in attitudes towards religious institutions and the rights of the individual is apparent in their relative societies, both in the works and in their historical and literary contexts.

Published in the wake of the emancipation of the serfs, *Fathers and Sons* received an engaged reaction from contemporary radical Russian critics such as Pisarev and Herzen, particularly on the subject of the Nihilist character Bazarov, who divided vehement opinions.<sup>339</sup> Before 1861, Russia was not a nation-state in the nineteenth century in the way that either Smith<sup>340</sup> or Anderson<sup>341</sup> would have seen it: it was neither secular, capitalist nor essentially bureaucratic, and the Tsar still attracted devotion in his leadership in a manner that no modern monarchy would recognise today. The

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<sup>338</sup> Although we must concede that Da'ud's role, in comparison with that of Bazarov, is quite minimal. (See Aida Imangulieva, *Jibrān, Rihani & Naimy: East-West interactions in early twentieth-century Arab literature*, trans. Robin Thomson (Oxford: Inner Farne, 2009), p.164: 'Even Da'ud's remarks – and he is the main representative of the new directions – come over as modest, calm and as though waiting for something. Here are none of the storms or passions of a Bazarov.')

<sup>339</sup> See I.N. Sukhikh (ed.), *Roman I.S. Turgeneva "Ottsy i deti" v russkoj kritike* (Leningrad: Izd-vo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1986), Petr Grigorevich Pustovoit, *Roman I. S. Turgeneva "Ottsy i deti" i ideina i a bor ba 60-kh godov XIX veka* (Moscow: Izd-vo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1960), Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons: the Author on the Novel: the Contemporary Reaction: Essays in Criticism* Michael R. Katz (trans.) (New York: Norton, 1995) and Harold Bloom (ed.), *Ivan Turgenev* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 2003).

<sup>340</sup> Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>341</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006).

Emancipation of the Serfs act, however, caused a sea change in social and political thinking in Russia on account of its important effect upon the national consciousness,<sup>342</sup> and although this chapter is not about the historical context surrounding *Fathers and Sons*, it is worth remarking on this important difference between Turgenev's and Naimy's works. The great political act of 1861 bore down deep into the structure of Russia's feudal society, dislocating the foundations of a country that was built with the nobility and the Orthodox Church at the top of a huge pyramid, supported by a vast, disenfranchised peasantry. Emancipating the serfs and disrupting this rigid structure sent a message to the country's population that spread like a virus in its political consciousness. If the serfs could be the masters of their own destiny, it was asked by philosophical, political and literary thinkers of the day, then where did authority in the country lie? Suddenly, every mode of authority and power was subject to question: nobility, the Church, the Tsar and, for people like Bazarov, God.<sup>343</sup>

Naimy's reading of Turgenev displays an understanding of how social forces influence national (or transnational) identities, albeit in a radically different political environment. However, the parallels between the two environments is of interest to our study here.<sup>344</sup> Arab writers like Naimy were predictably conscious of a struggle with imperial powers, first Ottoman, then

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<sup>342</sup> Especially economically and industrially, where 1861 is seen as the watershed between modern and traditional Russia: see Olga Crisp, 'Labour and Industrialization in Russia,' *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe: The Industrial Economies Capital, Labour, and Enterprise*. Peter Mathias and M. M. Postan (eds.) (Cambridge: CUP, 1978).

<sup>343</sup> For more information on this core issue in Russia's imperial history, see Terence Emmons' *Emancipation of the Russian Serfs* (London: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, 1970) and Roxanne Easley's *The Emancipation of the Serfs in Russia* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>344</sup> Jauss (1982): 'a text from the past is of interest not only in reference to its primary context, but that it is also interpreted to disclose a possible significance for the contemporary situation' (p.143).

European, in asserting Arab community interests. Imangulieva concurs with this opinion with reference to the writing of *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*:

At the start of the twentieth century the mood among Arab writers and intellectuals, including Naimy, coincided with the awakening of national self-consciousness in the countries of the East. The transition of the Arab countries to capitalism took place against the backdrop of a national freedom struggle against the expansionist policies of the European powers.<sup>345</sup>

However, to invoke 'the transition to capitalism' in the context of *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* seems anachronistic as Naimy only became aware of the full extent of capitalism on his home country after he returned to Lebanon in 1932.<sup>346</sup>

Instead, *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* questions subservience to tradition in its dialogues between the characters, a theme explored by Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, as Naimy expresses in the opening exchanges:

Ilyās

Come in, come in. (He faces the door, opens it and sees Dāwūd.)

Welcome, welcome to my friend, Dāwūd. God be praised that you gave in and honoured us with a visit. After all, this home knows you and you know it.

Dāwūd

Home?! This is a museum of antiquities.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Imangulieva, op. cit., p.161.

<sup>346</sup> *Sab'ūn* III, p.30ff. gives Naimy's impressions of Lebanon when he returns to the country and the changes that capitalist manifestations, such as cars and lighting, have made on his community.

<sup>347</sup> *Al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, p.155.

Naimy asks us to consider the rights of the characters to express themselves as individuals in the face of what we would perceive to be societal norms. In order to do this, we must once again consider the context in which it was written, as the rights of the individual had been a subject for debate in Arabic writing for over a century. The community of the Arab world underwent a cultural encounter of considerable importance when Napoleon arrived in Egypt in 1798 and unintentionally instigated a process of reassessing the individual's place and purpose within society.<sup>348</sup> This process was continuing to evolve during the first half of the twentieth century when Naimy was at the early stage of his writing career.<sup>349</sup>

Like Turgenev, Naimy wrote *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* against the shadow of sweeping reforms in the political administration, as the Ottoman Empire underwent the *Tanzimāt*<sup>350</sup> reforms of the nineteenth century, but he also wrote with his anti-imperialistic prejudices that had first been instilled and underlined by Anṭūn Ballān. These leanings would have been reinforced while he was in the United States as the details of the persecution of a *Christian* minority, in this case the Armenians, within the Ottoman Empire became apparent: hundreds of thousands had been either exterminated, forcibly proselytised by

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<sup>348</sup> See 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Hasan al-Jabartī, *'Ajā'ib al-āthār fī-t-tarājim wa-al-akbār* (Cairo: Maṭba'a Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1997-1998) and Daniel L Newman (trans. and ed.), *An Imam in Paris: al-Tahtawi's Visit to France (1826-1831)* (London: Saqi, 2004).

<sup>349</sup> The process is charted by Albert Hourani in his work *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), which takes the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt as its commencement point.

<sup>350</sup> Literally meaning 'reorganisations,' the *tanzimāt* reforms of c.1839-81 aimed to strengthen the Ottoman Empire through modernising and Westernising governmental administration, particularly in such areas as law, the armed forces, the economy and language. See Ahmed Akgunduz and Said Ozturk, *Ottoman History: Misperceptions and Truths* (Rotterdam: Islamitische Universiteit Rotterdam, 2011) for a basic description of these reforms; and Ussama Samir Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (London: University of California, 2000) for a discussion of their effects in Lebanon.

the Islamic government or sent into exile.<sup>351</sup> This news would have had a particular resonance with Naimy as For Naimy, this was concrete evidence of what Ballān had lectured to him about the malice of the Ottoman government, and a further example of what his reading of Russian literature instilled in him about how authoritarian government in general leads to the oppression of the weakest members of society.

The worst excesses of imperial autocracy, to Naimy's mind, come about from an unwillingness to change societal norms and *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* addresses this problem at the fundamental unit of the community: the family. Malignant social stagnation is most evident in *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* in the character of 'Umm Ilyās, whose adherence to the ways of her society are so deeply ingrained in her psyche that she goes to see Mūsā to discuss the impending marriage and how best to expedite the affair, even after her daughter Zinat has tried to commit suicide by poisoning herself. Ilyās gives a calculated assessment of her character and intentions:

Don't forget, my friend, that Umm Ilyās does not only represent just one generation, but *generations*, whose convictions, prejudices, and illusions are etched on her soul and are rooted in its earth. And it is not easy to pull out these roots. They may well overcome you before you defeat them. Be cautious, Dāwūd. Tear out one root, and a thousand will grow in its place.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> See, for example, Richard G. Hovannisian, *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1992). Naimy may well have read the newspaper reports of the 'Million Armenians Killed or in Exile' who, according to one article were the human result of 'a deliberate plan of the Turkish government to "get rid of the Armenian question," as Abdul Hamid once said, by getting "rid of the Armenians."' (The New York Times, December 15, 1915).

<sup>352</sup> *Al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, p.35.

Progress in a society, Naimy reasonably asserts, will only be made once people treat the causes of discontent amongst the families of Lebanon, and not by simply attacking the most stubborn bearers of customs – such as, for want of a better expression, arranged marriages – ill-suited to the modern world. It is the same kind of thinking that informs Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons*, although his tone and manner are far less conciliatory. Progress for Bazarov consists of using science and working hard to promote one's interests:

'I've had a look at all your father's arrangements,' Bazarov began saying again. 'The cattle are in a poor state and the horses are decrepit. The buildings are also needing repair and the workers look like a crowd of inveterate loafers, while the bailiff's either a fool or a rogue, I can't make out which.'

'You're very harsh today, Evgeny Vasilevich.' [Said by Arkady.]

'And the good little peasants'll take your father for everything he's got. You know the saying: "The Russian peasant'll gobble up God."'<sup>353</sup>

Amongst Russian critics, there was a feeling that the main protagonist was a character already known to people. V. Yu. Troitsky, for instance, remarked that 'characters like Bazarov were appearing in different countries at the time of collapse of the obsolete forms; Bazarov was "familiar" to many.'<sup>354</sup> This is an important point of departure for Naimy as he does not attempt to make his characters Dāwūd and Ilyās the archetypes for characters to appear in real life and literature all over the country, but rather to make them an allegorical

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<sup>353</sup> *Fathers and Sons*, p.51.

<sup>354</sup> V. Yu. Troitsky, *Kniga pokoleniy: O romane I.S. Turgeneva "Otsi i deti"* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1979).

representation of the disaffection and injustice felt by the youth of the Arab world.

Dāwūd is far less apocalyptic in his views on Arab society and assumes the role of a man who is trying to negotiate a new path for Arab society, rather than someone who foresees their destruction through their own mistakes. On the point of Ilyās' obedience to his mother, Dāwūd says:

It's said, 'respect your mother and father.' But it isn't said, 'obey your mother and father even when they are wrong.' Yes, obedience to the truth is good, but disobedience of the falsehood is much better.<sup>355</sup>

Elsewhere, Dāwūd is prescient about social upheaval in the Arab world and optimistic on the capacity for change, although he does not adopt the disinterested positivism of Bazarov. As he says to his sister, Šahīdah:

Yes, this is the way of life for us in the East. But it has to change. God willing, it will change. And no doubt it will change because the sons of this generation have been born into a world quite unlike that which their fathers were born into.<sup>356</sup>

The roles of Dāwūd and Ilyās in *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, that is to say the negotiation between the characters in developing a political world-view on the stage and to present to the reader a means through which Arab society can pursue a fairer, more modern society, both resemble and contrast with the roles of Bazarov and Arkady Kirsanov in *Fathers and Sons*. Bazarov represents the spirit of intrigue without hindrance: a scientist and intellectual dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge who will not be hampered by emotions,

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<sup>355</sup> *Al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, p.34.

<sup>356</sup> *Al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, p.65.

patriarchal authority or God; Kirsanov is his disciple who imbibes his ideas, but tames them through his sentimental attachment to his father and home. Progress for Russia lies in the middle ground between these two characters: social advancement should take the genius of Bazarov and tempering that phenomenon before applying it to a less strident populace represented by Kirsanov. Naturally, the acts of dialectics which takes place between both pairs of men draws our comparisons, but Naimy's Ilyās is less malleable than Turgenev's Kirsanov and the conversations between him and Dāwūd are on more equal terms:

Dāwūd

[In response to Ilyās' talk of suicide] Your rope will snap. There aren't any gallows that could hold a giant like you...

Ilyās

Don't mock, Dāwūd. I'm not joking. I'm bored of life. I'm bored to the point of sickness. I'm bored of its throwbacks and repetitions and its detours and evasions that are all to no avail. 'We come and go as we need to, but the necessities of life are never ending.'<sup>357</sup>

In spite of Ilyās' loquacity and intelligence, Naimy makes it clear in the piece that Dāwūd carries a great deal of Naimy's spiritual expressions on his shoulders. We learn that his intellectual sources of inspiration are signified by the two portraits that hang in his study of Tolstoy and Jesus.<sup>358</sup> The placing of these two figureheads of philosophy and morality into the centre of the play is not accidental; they are staged depictions of Naimy's own religious and

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<sup>357</sup> *Al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, p.26.

<sup>358</sup> *Al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, p.49: Tolstoy's portrait hangs on the east wall, while Jesus' faces it on the west wall.

political convictions, guided largely by the Christian Anarchism and fundamental teachings of Jesus that Tolstoy espoused in his religious essays, but also by Tolstoy's political drive to protect the weaker, disenfranchised groups of society.<sup>359</sup> Like Tolstoy, he was consumed by what he saw as the social problems of his country all around him and none was greater, nor had a more pertinent impact on his writing of fiction, than that of the misery of exile, which informed some of the most important short stories Naimy embarked upon after *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*.

### Exile in Naimy's Short Stories

If any single phenomenon of the Arab world reified the problematic relationship the Arab world had with the developed countries of the time – or the East had with the West, to put the situation into Naimy's terminology<sup>360</sup> – and the tensions of the global hierarchy, then that was the phenomenon of exile. The term 'exile' is loaded with connotations, many of them negative feelings of banishment, punishment and the inability to return to one's homeland,<sup>361</sup> and for Naimy and certain family members the experience of living in the United States of America was definitely traumatic.<sup>362</sup> As we

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<sup>359</sup> This reception of Tolstoy's works by Arab readers can be seen in some of the articles on Tolstoy in the literary journal, *an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* (see next chapter).

<sup>360</sup> See *at-Taw'amān: aṣ-ṣarq wa-l-ġarb*, from *al-Bayādir*.

<sup>361</sup> Exile, however, can also have positive connotations, as Halim Barakat observes in 'Explorations in Exile and Creativity' from Kamal Abdel-Malek and Wael B. Hallaq (eds.), *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Issa J. Boullata* (Leiden: Brill, 2000). I shall be using the term here to include both its primary definition of banishment and its secondary definition of voluntary absence from one's homeland ("exile noun" Oxford Dictionary of English. Edited by Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2010. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. School of Oriental and African Studies. 24 August 2012 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t140.e0280190>>).

<sup>362</sup> This is all, of course, with reference to Naimy's own personal case. We should also point out that exile has loaded, religious connotations in Arabic when we consider Muḥammad's *hijrah* from Mecca to Medina and its importance in the Islamic heritage.

negotiate the subject of exile, we shall also have cause to consider the question of identity that being a foreigner living abroad prompts.

Mikhail's experience of living in the USA was fundamentally different from that of his brothers. Where Naimy's father and aunt had failed in their attempts to secure financial security for their family, his elder brothers, Haykal and 'Adīb, succeeded spectacularly. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the two brothers were living what could be described as the American dream: they had arrived in New York with virtually no capital, but their hard work and application had led to their owning their own businesses and leading an affluent lifestyle in Washington State. Their success, and 'Adīb's subsequent visit to Baskinta, effectively forced Naimy, after his return from Poltava, to jettison his ideas of studying law at the Sorbonne and to pursue his intellectual career instead at Walla Walla University.

My brother's visit to his family and country did not last, but in its brevity it was a point that greatly changed the course of my life. During a conversation, my brother persuaded me that, for the good of my future, it would be best if I travelled back with him to America and there enrolled in one of its many universities. There are forty eight states, and in each state there is a university. The teaching there is either free or practically free. Washington state, by the Pacific coast, has a university which is not too bad. Furthermore, Paris is a noisy city.<sup>363</sup>

Moving into voluntary exile for academic and economic considerations was to have a radical effect upon Naimy and his works for a number of reasons. Much has been said about his meeting with his Scottish roommate, who

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<sup>363</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.424.

introduced him to theosophy,<sup>364</sup> but in my opinion the relevance and importance of this meeting can be exaggerated, especially considering that he had previously flirted with Freemasonry for the same spiritual reasons,<sup>365</sup> and also as he had already been introduced to some of the ideas of non-Abrahamic faiths through the works of Tolstoy.<sup>366</sup>

As we shall see, Naimy's vision of the phenomenon of exile related back to the literary expressions of the Russian writers he had been reading all his life; many of the Russian writers to whom Naimy attached a special importance underwent the experience of exile either because of judicial processes or because they wished to gain a greater insight into the essence of both themselves and their country.<sup>367</sup> Furthermore, Naimy's expression of the *mahjar* (i.e. Syro-Lebanese Arabs living in North America) experience owes a great deal to his reading of Russian literature – the forms and genres he chose to articulate the thoughts and feelings of the exiled community mirrored the type of literature he had begun to read in Poltava and which was being translated and reproduced in the Arab literary journal *al-Funūn*.

Naimy's short stories largely assert that poverty was the leading *conscious* socio-political factor in the choices of many young people to leave their homes and families and establish themselves in a foreign country.<sup>368</sup> The relative poverty of Mount Lebanon in the region had come about as a result of

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<sup>364</sup> Nadeem Naimy, op. cit., p.110.

<sup>365</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.78ff.

<sup>366</sup> See especially his *On Life and Essays on Religion*.

<sup>367</sup> Pushkin was sentenced to 'internal exile' and Dostoevsky was sent to an *ostrog* (prison) in Siberia, while Gorky travelled extensively across Russia in his youth and later moved to Capri for health and political reasons; all of whom were the subjects of biography articles in *an-Nafā'is al-aşriyyah* and of essays in *Fi al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*.

<sup>368</sup> Particularly in some of the short stories we shall discuss here: *Sā'at al-kūkū*, *al-Bankārūliyā* and, although more obliquely, *Sa'ādat "al-bēg."*

internecine religious strife between Druzes and Christians, and internal migration to Beirut in search of employment opportunities.<sup>369</sup> Beirut's own importance as a port may have been adversely affected by the Suez Canal opening in 1869,<sup>370</sup> but its constitution as a separate Ottoman *wilāya*<sup>371</sup> in 1887 attracted much European, and above all, French, investment and the period up to the First World War was a boom era for the city.<sup>372</sup> Baskinta, as a result of being a remote village, was feted by no sources of major income for its agrarian population. Although the arrival of the Russians in the shape of the IOPS seemed to herald a new change in Baskinta's prospects, exile was still seen to be a necessary, if unwanted, option for any family looking to supplement their income. Naimy vividly charts the experiences of the émigrés community in his autobiography by concentrating on the experiences of the families who are left behind in the village.<sup>373</sup>

There is generally only one place of exile in the works of Mikhail Naimy: the USA.<sup>374</sup> Naimy often makes a diametric opposition of the Arab world to the USA based on their relative cultural values and their differing socio-political systems. While the Arab world, usually Naimy's home country Lebanon, and its people debate and encourage, or warn against, traditional values and

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<sup>369</sup> Traboulsi (2007), p.56.

<sup>370</sup> Abū-Ḥaidar (1979), p.4.

<sup>371</sup> A *wilāya* in this political sense denotes 'the government or administration of a region or province under the supreme overlordship of a [...] sultan' (*Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Brill online).

<sup>372</sup> Traboulsi (2007), pp.52-72.

<sup>373</sup> The first non-wooden house to be erected in the village was the result of another family's member going to Egypt and making enough money to furnish his family with better housing (*Sab'ūn I*, p.40).

<sup>374</sup> This is despite the fact that the *mahjar* of Lebanon had a long tradition in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of emigrating to the Americas, with huge numbers settling in South America. See Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ġani Ḥassan, *aš-Šīr al-'arabī fi-l-mahjar* (Kuwait: Dār al-qalam, 1976), 'Abbas Iḥṣān, *aš-Šīr al-'arabī fi-l-mahjar: aš-šamāliyyat amīkā* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957) and Farīd Juḥā, *al-'Urūba fi-š-šīr al-mahjar* (Beirut: Maktaba Ra's Bayrūt, 1965).

spiritual wisdom,<sup>375</sup> the USA is depicted as an irrational land, one where materialism holds sway over the minds of the people and – in the mind of the author – the ephemeral impulses of science are lauded over and above any kind of god.<sup>376</sup> In this reading not only can we see the evidence of the thinking that Naimy expounded in his intellectual essays, but a modern reworking of the tropes of home, place and alienation that exist in the works of, *inter alios*, Gogol and Gorky.<sup>377</sup>

Naimy portrays a skewed sense of logic in his depictions of how Lebanese emigrants fare once they have established themselves in the USA. When we look at a short story like *Sa'adat "al-bēg"* (His Excellency the Bey),<sup>378</sup> the portrayal of the protagonist of the story is a deliberate attempt by the author to suggest that the Bey has become so corrupt and misguided in his morality that the East can no longer accommodate him, but he must instead locate himself in a community that shares a similar lack of scruples and reason. Here, we must recap on the story: the last of a line of shaykhs of a small village in Lebanon has always been highly respected by the locals on account of his wealth and title. However, as his family fortune dwindled, he found his position usurped by a local's acquisition of wealth, popular respect and, most importantly, the title of shaykh. Stricken with jealousy, the first shaykh pretends to have been summoned by the Governor who has conferred on him

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<sup>375</sup> This is expounded more in Naimy's fiction, not merely *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, but also *Liqā'*, *Sanatuhā al-jadīdah*, *al-Bankārūliyā*, etc.

<sup>376</sup> This reading is emphasised at length in Naimy's essay *at-Taw'amān: aš-šarq wa-l-ġarb*.

<sup>377</sup> The trope of alienation and dislocation can be seen Gogol's St Petersburg-set *Nos* and *Shinel'*, and through a different lens the same tropes appear in Gorky's Steppe stories. This is not to downplay, of course, the same tropes that exist in the Arabic prose tradition, from the tales of Sindbad the Sailor in *Alf laila wa laila*, through Rifā'a Rāfi' at-Ṭaḥṭāwī's *Taklīṣ al-ibrīz ilā talkīṣ bārīz*, to Faris Shidyaq's *as-Sāq 'alā-s-sāq fīmā huwa al-fāryāq*.

<sup>378</sup> *Kān ma kān*, pp.101-12.

the status of 'Bey,' thus establishing his superiority once more. When his deceit is uncovered, the 'Bey' finds he cannot live with the ignominy of being labelled proud, a liar and, worse still, of secondary status in the village, so he emigrates to the USA where he can live out a false Bey-like existence, imagining that the people there are subservient to him and that he does not have to pay for his meals in the Lebanese restaurant:

He didn't extend his hand to me, nor asked after my health. No greetings or 'Good health.' And when I made a slip of the tongue and said, 'Greetings, Sheikh 'As'ad,' he glanced angrily at me, almost as if he could have eaten me with his eyes, and said: "As'ad *Bey*, Bu 'Assāf! 'As'ad *Bey*!' He then went straight to a table, sat down and ordered a meal. I brought to him everything he ordered and more, and tried several times to talk to him, but he wouldn't speak to me. When he had eaten his fill, he got up and said: 'Put it on the bill, Bu 'Assāf.' Then he left.<sup>379</sup>

This complicity on the part of the restaurant owner is part of his own constructed Lebanese identity – the part that carries ideas about subservience to the Bey's authority, even though in the capitalist, modernist United States the Bey's insistence upon his 'correct' title looks out of place, even lunatic. Naimy, through the characters in the short story, is constructing a social and cultural identity for the Lebanese émigré community that, while physically in the West, mentally is stuck between the East and the West.

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<sup>379</sup> *Kān ma kān*, pp.110-1.

This was, of course, very similar to the position that Naimy adopted in real life<sup>380</sup> and certainly reflects the ideological position of *ar-Rābiṭah al-qalamiyyah* (The Pen League), a society founded by Naimy, Jibrān, 'Arīḍa, et al., in order to promote modern Arabic literature from a conceptual and geographical distance where they did not feel entrapped by the traditions that they believed had stilted Arabic literature's progress thus far. This is an important point insofar that they reckoned themselves to be a radical proposition in Arabic literature and wished to wrestle its poetry out of the quagmire in which it had found itself stuck.<sup>381</sup> However, they still perceived themselves to be part of the same Arabic tradition, as their short stories and essays were directed towards their audiences in the Arab world, rather than establishing themselves as a separate tradition in a constructed *mahjar* hybrid literature. For *ar-Rābiṭah al-qalamiyyah*, their goal was to introduce Russian and Western literary styles to an Arab audience who would then view the foreign genres as a means to express local content, in the way that Naimy was starting to do in his theatre and short stories.<sup>382</sup>

Naimy's portrayal of the restaurant owner in *Sa'adat "al-bēg"* owes much of its style to his reading of Gogol's collection of short stories *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikanki* (Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka). In Gogol's short stories the individual tales are enveloped by the avuncular chats of Rudy

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<sup>380</sup> Naimy never felt comfortable in New York society ('It seemed to me the whole thing was false and empty,' he wrote in a letter to his two brothers (Nadeem Naimy, p.158)), yet, we should note, his approach to the USA was in stark contrast to his brothers' experiences. Haykal and Adib positively embraced the American lifestyle and even changed their first names to anglicized versions; Mikhail never changed his Christian name, but decided while in Washington to use the same anglicized rendering of his surname, Naimy, that his brothers employed.

<sup>381</sup> As will be discussed in more detail in the criticism chapter.

<sup>382</sup> Further studies into this area can be found in Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Panko, who narrates the stories themselves to the reader – as if the audience were sitting in the same room as him.

At home, dear readers – no offense meant (you may be annoyed at a beekeeper like me addressing you so plainly, as though I were speaking to some old friend or crony) – at home in the village it has always been the peasants’ habit, as soon as the work in the fields is over, to climb up on the stove and rest there all winter, and we beekeepers put our bees away in a dark cellar.<sup>383</sup>

As we can see from the opening of his short story, Naimy has adopted the same kind of technique – the warm and sensitive characterisation of the narrator, the familiarisation of a rural (Arab) world-view and the pitching of the scene in a close family setting – but moulded it to suit a new realistic type of genre, placing two customers in the position where the reader would be for Gogol:

Before we exchanged a single word, he said:

“That was the Bey. Did you see him?”

We asked him “The Bey’s” name and what he did, and he went on:

“His name is ‘As’ad ad-Da’wāq, and he is from our village in Lebanon – the last of the sheikhs of the house of Da’wāq who have ruled our village for a long time.<sup>384</sup>

Naimy’s main reason for making this subtle change is the realisation on his part that Gogol’s device, although effective in the early part of the nineteenth century, could look affected or contrived to a readership in the twentieth

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<sup>383</sup> N.V. Gogol, *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*, trans. Constance Garnett (London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.4.

<sup>384</sup> *Kān ma kān*, p.104.

century. The restaurant owner thus speaks to the reader through the medium of the customers, ensuring the effect of a more realistic scenario in the prose. But there is something more fundamental in the similarity between Gogol and Naimy. Both are speaking for the case for a marginalised group within a larger set of people – in Gogol’s case, he was depicting the Ukrainian folk of whom he was a product himself, but who were underrepresented in Russian and Ukrainian literature.<sup>385</sup>

Naimy meanwhile presents the dilemma of Mount Lebanese rural folk on whom was imposed a social and economic status subaltern to urban centres, and who were of a lowly position in the global political and economic hierarchy, and for whom poverty was a frequent problem and exile a plausible solution. In both works, there is an element of sentimentalism in the depiction of these peasant communities, especially in the older Gogol’s works where the action is frequently absurd and theatrical and the characters, like Rudy Panko, almost like caricatures rather than real people. Naimy’s work also suffers from the effects of sentimentalism as the overarching emblem in ‘The Bey,’ the trope of the East-West encounter, is played rather too simplistically in the character of the restaurant-owner refusing to extract money from the Bey. Naimy presents the restaurant-owner as personifying an oasis of eastern Gnosticism in a desert of American materialism, which is intended to contrast sharply against the backdrop of the capitalist and modernist New York of the early twentieth century.<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> In fact, Ukrainian identity had been systematically suppressed during the nineteenth century. ‘Before 1917, the [Imperial Russian] autocracy had rejected the very notion of a separate Ukrainian nationality and had vigorously repressed attempts by the Ukrainian intelligentsia to instil national consciousness among the peasantry.’ Steven L. Guthier, ‘The Popular Base of Ukrainian Nationalism in 1917’ (Slavic Review, vol.38, no.1 (Mar., 1979)), p.31.

<sup>386</sup> *Sa’ādat “al-bēg”* was written in 1919.

While the depictions of peasant communities in Gogol's short stories are, as modern scholarship testifies, complex reactions through contrived folklore, developed from heterogeneous sources,<sup>387</sup> to external (Russian) ideas of the pastoral and to Gogol's marginal status as an (Ukrainian) outsider,<sup>388</sup> Naimy's reading of Gogol is naive<sup>389</sup> and this is illustrated in his short stories. Naimy's evocation of parallel Arab peasant communities are honest and realistic in his description of all the follies and misguided practices of the members of the communities when they are separated from the moral framework that forms an intrinsic feature of their home. We witness the selfishness of a son who goes to the USA to seek his fortune in *al-Bankārūliyā*, yet not only fails to make any money but also succeeds in spending all his father's savings and driving him to the point of distraction:

The dung covered the diploma completely. 'Abū Šāhīn took paper, an envelope and a pen, and then wrote on the paper in his shaky hand and plain style wrote as follows:

"My son Šāhīn! This is all the money that you and the Bancarolia have left me. I am sending it to you in order to help you get back home. But if you can't stay where you are. Yours ..."

He folded the letter around two strands of goatshair and two flattened goat droppings.<sup>390</sup>

<sup>387</sup> See Peter Sawczak, 'Heterogeneity of the Sacred in Gogol's "Dikan'ka" Stories' (*Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 41, No. 3/4, Sep-Dec 1999, pp.351-366).

<sup>388</sup> For some of the latest scholarship on this issue, see Yuliya Ilchuk's 'Nikolai Gogol's Self-Fashioning in the 1830s: The Postcolonial Perspective' (*Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 51, No. 2/3, THE 200TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BIRTH OF NIKOLAI GOGOL/ MYKOLA HOHOL' (1809-1852) (June-September 2009), pp. 203-221) and Rachel S. Platonov's 'Remapping Arcadia: "Pastoral Space" in Nineteenth-Century Russian Prose' (*The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 102, No. 4 (Oct., 2007), pp. 1105-1121).

<sup>389</sup> Naimy himself corroborates with this point in *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnūn*, p.75.

<sup>390</sup> 'Abū baṭṭah (in *al-Majmū'ah al-kāmilah*, vol.2), pp.545-6.

Here, the characters are metonyms for their constituent communities, pitched in an ideological battleground which Naimy personally understood. The political aspect of these writings – the action of putting such a community at the centre of the narrative by implying that other more affluent and advanced areas of human civilisation, that may feel themselves to be superior and more sophisticated, are in reality shallow, dissolute and superficial – runs through the thread of the prose and constantly makes itself aware to the reader through inviting them to consider whom or what the main protagonists represent.

Yet, another of Naimy's short stories shows that there is redemption for those who choose to exploit the capitalist possibilities that the USA presents and find that, almost inevitably in Naimy's *Weltanschauung*, the American system makes another victim out of them. *Sā'at al-kūkū* (The Cuckoo Clock, 1925) is emblematic of Naimy's political ideas and debt to Russian literature; the story comes from the same collection as other stories of its ilk: *Kān ma kān* (Once Upon a Time). At once a moral tale on the false hope and optimism that capitalism instils in people, *Sā'at al-kūkū* reminds the reader of the invaluable role spiritualism plays in societies in the East (and, we may infer from our reading, ought to in the West):

Mister Thomson. Mister... Thomson... Two words that have no meaning at all for the children of a Lebanese village, and additionally would not be the names on people's lips. They also did not correspond to what was found out about the man: that he had such excellent tastes

and was of such a decent innate character that they 'labelled' Mister Thomson with the moniker, 'Father of Knowledge.'<sup>391</sup>

There are many Naimy tropes at work here: amongst which is the East's acceptance of a wise, spiritual teacher that the West had rejected, articulating the themes that are explored in his intellectual essays. Furthermore, we have the trope of the stranger with a mysterious past who is embraced by the rural population who sanctify knowledge.<sup>392</sup> Further into the short story and clearly echoing the principle of mediation between the East and the West, we must note that 'Mister Thomson' is buried without the religious rites practised by either the 'Church of the East' or the 'Church of the West,' causing the leaders of both churches to eschew the ceremony.<sup>393</sup> Thomson's death symbolises the larger part of his life spent in the Lebanese village: his teaching and inspiration has been built around universal spiritualism, which aims to unite people, and not established churches, whose doctrines split communities. The short story charts the development of Thomson's spiritual outlook, recording how the betrayal of the capitalist system and his subsequent return to a simpler, rural life in Lebanon enlightened the main character. The same theme, that of seeking a true, meaningful life in rural communities and the futility of wealth, crops up on numerous occasions in Russian literature, but is

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<sup>391</sup> *Kān ma kān*, p.10.

<sup>392</sup> A theme that is developed more fully in *The Book of Mirdād*.

<sup>393</sup> As alluded to in the introduction, we should remind ourselves here that East-West interactions were explored by other contemporary Arab writers to great effect a few years later, namely Tawfīq al-Hakīm in '*Audat ar-rūḥ* (The Return of the Spirit, 1933) and '*Uṣfūr min aš-šarq* (A Sparrow from the East, 1938), and Yaḥyā Ḥaqqī in *Qindīl umm ḥāšim* (The Saint's Lamp, 1944), to take two examples. Likewise, Russia's position vis-à-vis Eastern and Western cultures has been explored extensively by Yuri Lotman (see Yuri Lotman, *O russkoi literature: stat'i issledovaniya, 1958-1993* (St Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 1997), Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (eds.), *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History* (London: Cornell University Press, 1985) and Andreas Schönle, *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2006)).

especially emblematic of Tolstoy<sup>394</sup> and was reinvented by Gorky. Reading the context of the short story, the similarities of Thomson vis-à-vis Naimy's own spiritual ethos are evident, but all the more so considering that Naimy wrote the short story in response to a family crisis over his younger brother who was planning to leave Lebanon for the United States, thus leaving only his parents behind in Baskinta.<sup>395</sup> Thomson espouses a Gnostic faith, close to the fundamental Christian ideology adhered to by Tolstoy, which preaches against what he sees as the corrosive poison of capitalism and greed:

The east looks at the west and sees the greatness of its vehicle, hears its rattling and creaking, and its movements dazzle him and its speed amazes him, then he says to himself: 'Glory upon you, neighbour, glory upon you! Where is my vehicle that is like yours? Will you not pity me and allow me to cling to its wheels?'

Thus the east speaks when he meets the west. Then, he throws away his vehicle and sells his soul, so he can get a vehicle like his neighbour's.<sup>396</sup>

Crucially in the story, through his praxis in both life and death, Mister Thomson simultaneously seeks to unite the churches of the East and West by his appeal to their followers, then undermine their authority by his community's refusal to allow his funeral to be overseen by either institution. Allegorically, the churches in the story (as, to a large extent, the churches of various Christian denominations performed in the Levant in the nineteenth

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<sup>394</sup> Pierre Bezukhov's quest for a purpose to life after dissolute experiences in St Petersburg and on his country estate in Naimy's beloved *War and Peace* was a particularly salient example of this trend.

<sup>395</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.332ff.

<sup>396</sup> *Kān ma kān*, p.26.

and twentieth centuries<sup>397</sup>) represent the partitioning of the world into nation-states with political agenda and self-interests. East and West are the most simple of geographical binary opposites, representative, for Naimy in the early twentieth century, of a great chasm in their wealth and also in attitudes towards capitalism and modernity in their respective communities. It is to this primary division of humanity that we shall now turn in considering Naimy's intellectual essays on the subject of global politics.

### **An Uneasy Pairing: Naimy's Formulation of East and West**

The political equivalent in Naimy's intellectual essays of the spiritual foundation stone found in the 'Face' essays in the *al-Marāḥil* collection is the piece *at-Taw'amān: aš-šarq wa-l-ġarb* (The Twins: East and West, 1945), which was written at a time of great social upheaval and political turmoil.<sup>398</sup> The Second World War provided the context for all of the essays in *al-Bayādir*, Naimy's collection of thoughts and suppositions about life and the universe, composed with ideas about Christianity and Russian literature fresh and accessible in his mind. The essay is by far the longest work in the *al-Bayādir* collection and offers a rather simplistic idea of how the Second World War, or the 'dogfight' (*takālub*)<sup>399</sup> as Naimy prefers to describe it, came about and how steps might be taken towards achieving a lasting peace and understanding between nations.

Put simply, the problem that has caused this mass devastation and conflict on a global scale is one of focus: the west is driven by science, modernity and

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<sup>397</sup> See Hopwood and Stavrou, op. cit., for more on this matter.

<sup>398</sup> The first edition of *al-Bayādir* was published in Cairo (Dār al-ma'ārif) in 1945 (Nijland, p.116).

<sup>399</sup> Occurs both in *at-Taw'amān* and in *Bilād dīnuhā fī famihā* (also from *al-Bayādir*).

capitalism, while the east continues to be propelled by spirituality and the wisdom of the prophets:

The east obeys the way of *insight*, the west obeys the way of *vision*.

The first gives birth to prophets, the second to scientists. The gift of the prophets to the world is faiths that raise the earth to the skies; the gift of scientists is science that makes the sky drop down to earth.<sup>400</sup>

Naimy is quite blatant about this division between two halves of the world being a value judgment: his text explicitly states that the west's preoccupation with the sciences and its capitalist society driven by a superficial, mechanised view of how the world works will inevitably lead to more and more crises on the same level of violence and mayhem as the current war entails:

The last war [i.e. World War I] marked the end of one era and the beginning of a new one on the surface of this planet. Upon its commencement, the West took up the role of cleaner and the shockwaves from the war retracted; the East assumed a role of indifference and the shockwaves lengthened.

This war that we carry today like a nightmare is nothing but one cycle from a series of disgraceful cycles of clearing and indifference.<sup>401</sup>

Naimy's focus has been described by Nadeem Naimy as being an expression of his infatuation with the idea of Karma in Buddhism that began to make itself more apparent in his thinking after his move to Washington State in 1911.<sup>402</sup> However, in his intellectual fragmentation of the world into parts driven by science and spirituality respectively, indeed in his

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<sup>400</sup> *At-Taw'amān*, p.147 (italics mine).

<sup>401</sup> *At-Taw'amān*, p.170.

<sup>402</sup> Nadeem Naimy, p.110 passim.

compartmentalisation of the world into east and west, we can once again see how Naimy appropriated and incorporated aspects of Russian literature into his intellectual *Weltanschauung*.

Russian literature had an interesting and creative dialogue with what it considered to be the 'east' in the literature of the period that interested Naimy in Poltava. Eastern peoples, those on the periphery of Russia, caught the public's imagination through writers' renderings of their exotic, warlike, alien lifestyle, a process that started during the romantic period of the nineteenth century. Tropes of noble savagery and wild people were centred around Russia's Orient: the Caucasus. Examples such as Pushkin's *Kavkazkii plennik* (The Prisoner of the Caucasus), Lermontov's *Dyemon* (The Demon) and *Geroy nashevo vremeni* (A Hero of Our Time),<sup>403</sup> and Tolstoy's *Kazaki* (The Cossacks) all contributed to a mythologizing of the Caucasian savage.<sup>404</sup> This intellectual division of east and west was further complicated by Gorky's characterisation of the people amongst whom he lived and worked,<sup>405</sup> which added to the wider context of modernity in Russian literature that was identifying a growing urban population in contrast to the peripheral peoples in a 'self' and 'other' dichotomy.<sup>406</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> See p.50 above.

<sup>404</sup> See Susan Layton, 'Nineteenth-Century Russian Mythologies of Caucasian Savagery' in Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzerini (eds.), *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), and David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), esp. ch.4.

<sup>405</sup> Many of Gorky's works are influenced by the period he spent in the Caucasus such as his short stories *Emel'yan Pilyay* and *V stepi* (On the Steppe).

<sup>406</sup> For context on modernity, see Malcolm Waters, *Modernity: Critical Concepts* (London: Routledge, 1999) and Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert and Kenneth Thompson (eds.), *Modernity: an Introduction to Modern Societies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); for the Russian literature context of modernity, see David L. Hoffman and Yanni Kotsonis, *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* (New York: Macmillan, 1995).

Keeping these tropes of savagery, fear of the other, and fights for self-determination in our minds, it should not surprise us that Naimy chose the moment of the Second World War to consider the question of the dynamics between two parts of the world he arbitrarily defined as east and west. In spite of the continuing historical political and cultural relevance of the Second World War, especially in the West, Naimy attempted to downplay some of its importance. Despite acknowledging the extraordinary reach of the war's ripples that were felt in every continent of the world, Naimy still intellectually tried to house the Second World War within the confines of a general history of the world, where the mass bloodshed constituted another sudden peak in a regular line graph of human brutality and murder. For a modern (and particularly a western) critic, this lack of appreciation for the seismic ground shifts the Second World War caused, both in a socio-economic context and in a consideration of the artistic movements forged as a result of the Second World War (and the shadow of the First World War),<sup>407</sup> this may seem like a disingenuity structured to accommodate his theosophic beliefs. Yet, we must remind ourselves at the beginning of this sub-chapter that Naimy did not have the critical benefit of hindsight. *Al-Bayādir* was above all a contemporary commentary on the world he saw around him. His analysis would be shaped not only by his spiritual views but also by Tolstoy's examination of history, as shown in the epilogues of *War and Peace*, in which Tolstoy's understanding of modernity, history and the need to realise the potential for the godhead within ourselves can be read:

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<sup>407</sup> See the chapter 'The Threshold of Liberty' in Robert Hughes' *The Shock of the New* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991) for an informed perspective on how both wars shaped European Surrealism.

If history had clung on to the ancient creeds it would have said that the Deity, wishing to reward or punish His people, gave power to Napoleon and directed his will for the attainment of His own divine ends. A clear and complete answer. You could believe in Napoleon's divine significance or not, but for a believer the entire history of that period would have been comprehensible and beyond contradiction.

But modern history can no longer respond like that. Science now repudiates the old idea of a Deity intervening in human affairs, so other answers must be found.<sup>408</sup>

Reckoning the current situation of global politics, in which the idea of conflict takes centre stage, Naimy proposes that the world is destined to repeat the mistakes of the Second World War until such time as human beings learn to embrace the potential of spirituality and realise that the ability to achieve the status of godhead lies within themselves.<sup>409</sup> This is, of course, material that we covered in the religion chapter, but *at-Taw'amān* transposes the focus of Naimy's religious formulations from socially removed environments (such as the wheat field) to an abstract consideration of the dilemma at the heart of the contemporary global puzzle and expounds how a dichotomy in faiths between west and east, the former in science and the latter in religion, has created a belligerent hierarchy – a hierarchy that Naimy claims is spurious:

The deceptions of authority have deluded the minds of people, so many people, that it is within the power of humanity to control others

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<sup>408</sup> *War and Peace*, p.1319.

<sup>409</sup> *At-Taw'amān*, p.155 (on the aims (*ahdaf*) of humanity).

and to be controlled. Surely, there is no such connection between one human and another, save for the communion that exists between two people where one person's share is equal to the next.<sup>410</sup>

Naimy's essay to a large degree hinges on a trope used in Arabic classical poetry, which is the definitions of two distinct but related words: *baṣar* and *baṣīrah*. Evidently both are evolved from the same trilateral root – *bā'-ṣād-rā'* – but while the first word can be defined as something that we would commonly refer to as normal vision, that which we see with the eyes, the second word corresponds to something more like insight. *Baṣīrah* has connotations of inner wisdom and an appeal to notions of instinct and spiritual impulse. A principal construct of the essay is Naimy's prophesy that the west's idolatry of science will be the cause of its own impending doom, as it fails to appreciate the *baṣīrah* necessary to comprehend the world fully:

Vision, centred on the eyes, puts all its weight on formulating forms, shapes and colours; from the forms and colours it proceeds to a thing's substance. While insight, centred on the heart and emotion, gravitates towards the central essence of things without considering their appearance. Both are at work behind knowledge, but the way of one is not the way of the other.<sup>411</sup>

The inferior status of the East in a global economic hierarchy is further questioned and deconstructed in other essays written by Naimy, where he asks similar questions of the emphasis that the West places upon power,

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<sup>410</sup> *At-Taw'amān*, p.163.

<sup>411</sup> *At-Taw'amān*, p.146.

hegemony and sciences.<sup>412</sup> Using the *baṣīrah* framework, Naimy asks towards which goal is humanity inevitably proceeding. Like Tolstoy, Naimy understood that a life lived without an appeal to spiritual insight, which can only be perceived by the heart rather than by the eyes, would be dull and empty.<sup>413</sup> (We can also compare Naimy's output with a closer contemporary, T. S. Eliot, made similar kinds of appeals to spirituality, specifically, Christianity, through his reaction to the Second World War.<sup>414</sup>) However, because it seems to Naimy that the world is unprepared to accept that this spiritual insight is a valuable part of the experience of life, he uses *at-Taw'amān* to interrogate the hierarchical power structure:

“Who will exchange me an incendiary bomb for a domestic miracle?  
A plane or a tank for a holy Scripture? Yea, who will exchange me one  
invention for ten prophets?”

What is that, what does it mean? Does insight beg for alms from  
vision? Does the sun appeal for help from a wick?

Naimy here deliberately conflates material with spiritual concerns to contrast more sharply the world-views of the East and West. Tolstoy had asked similar questions, particularly in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, of a world run by governments that were dedicated to the propagation of meaningless wars and the destruction of civilisation, and of the role played by communities in this carousel of violence. In his writings, he reached the conclusion that peace would only be attained in the world when people chose

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<sup>412</sup> We can point here to a few examples from *Zād al-mī'ād*, such as *Madīnat al-ālāt wa al-'azmāt*, *Ṣannīn wa-d-dūlār* and *Širka al-'insāniya*.

<sup>413</sup> Tolstoy's *A Confession* maps out many of the same principles as *at-Taw'amān*, albeit in a more personal style.

<sup>414</sup> See John Xiros Cooper, *T.S. Eliot and the Ideology of Four Quartets* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

to practise the true teachings of Christ and jettison the idea of human civilisation separated by the human construct of nations.

The man who holds the divine theory of life recognizes life not in his own individuality, and not in societies of individualities (in the family, the clan, the nation, the tribe, or the government), but in the eternal undying source of life – in God; and to fulfil the will of God he is ready to sacrifice his individual and family and social welfare. The motor power of his life is love. And his religion is the worship in deed and in truth of the principle of the whole – God.<sup>415</sup>

Reducing communities to a contrived concept that divided people and pushed them into conflict and emphasising the healing, unifying power of Christ's original teachings were two basic issues where Naimy and Tolstoy found a great deal of common ground. They both showed an acute sensitivity to the macro-political interplay of historical events and social movements. Yet, we notice in our analysis that both writers choose not to concretise their ideas by anchoring their schemas to actual examples of countries, dates and events, but instead write of a theoretical paradigm, a utopian fantasy, that addresses future battles as much as it does historic wars.

So, we are in the vanguard of a dawn that announces the end of one cycle and heralds the beginning of another. How much power is held by this dawn? When will it be dislodged from a new morning and a new day – in this generation or the next? The answer is not up to us, but

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<sup>415</sup> Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (London: Walter Scott, 1894), p.86.

with those who 'hold a thousand years in their eyes like the yesterday passed and the slumber of the night.'<sup>416</sup>

### **The Philosophy of *War and Peace* and Naimy's *East and West***

Tolstoy's philosophical essays which form the epilogue of *War and Peace* set out in detail the philosophical deliberations and the logical arguments behind his view of history as set out in the main prose. These initially gave Naimy cause for bewilderment and disagreement with the ethics of Tolstoy when he first read the novel in Poltava. Upon his first reading the novel raised some insoluble questions that Tolstoy appeared to have got wrong in his depictions of two of the main historical characters, Kutuzov and Napoleon:

I cannot say, however, that I do not see a contradiction in what [Tolstoy] says about Napoleon and about Kutuzov. For Napoleon, in his opinion, was not propelled by his own will, but by the might of circumstances and the will of the people. Meanwhile, he attests that the power of Kutuzov was down to his will and experience and was thus the primary factor in defeating Napoleon and subsequently driving him from Russia.<sup>417</sup>

However, Naimy's respect for Tolstoy overshadowed any doubts he might have had about the philosophical soundness of the theories that underpinned the novel. Naimy's doubts about the logical contradictions in *War and Peace* were eclipsed by his faith in Tolstoy's philosophical essays, as he recorded in a moment that came to him like an epiphany in the seminary:

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<sup>416</sup> *At-Taw'amān*, p.171.

<sup>417</sup> *Sab'ūn*, p.282.

Pardon me, Lev Nikolaevich. I am indebted to you for many ideas that lit up what was dark in my spiritual world. In many of your later publications which I read last year, I fell upon a light that would guide me in every step I take.<sup>418</sup>

Although it would be many years before he expressed the same kinds of thoughts in his own prose works, Naimy knew when he was reading *War and Peace* that he had tapped into an important source for understanding the political mechanisms of the world, one that would come to shape his own *Weltanschauung* when widespread conceptions of the socio-economic global system were interrogated during the fundamental shake-up of the Second World War.

A great deal of academic literature has been written on Tolstoy's view of history and the ideas that he expressed in *War and Peace* concerning the atemporal logic of human enterprise and the inevitability of future generations to repeat the mistakes of the past. Of these, arguably the most renowned is Isaiah Berlin's famous essay on the subject *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, in which he espoused the notion that the personalities of history were not nearly as important as the fundamental patterns of a world that ran on influencing factors:

But history is 'one of the most backward of sciences – a science which has lost its proper aim.' The reason for this is that history will not, because it cannot, solve the great questions which have tormented men in every generation. In the course of seeking to answer these questions men accumulate a knowledge of facts as they succeed each

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

other in time: but this is a mere by-product, a kind of ‘side issue’ which - and this is a mistake – is studied as an end in itself.<sup>419</sup>

Tolstoy himself despised the idea of historians dramatising the history of the world as if it were a series of unrelated, cataclysmic events:

In this way *War and Peace*, although historical in setting, became a formal protest against that prevalent view of history, which isolated certain showy fragments of the past and treated them as if they formed an intelligible and important whole. Tolstoy accused the “chroniclers of historical glory,” whether in war or politics, of seeing nothing beyond the ugly eruptions in human affairs and mistaking these eruptions for life itself. How could men know the normal pulse of history if they tested it only when it was in a feverish state?<sup>420</sup>

We have already seen how *at-Taw’amān* reflects (but also subverts) this view of Tolstoy, observing that future wars will be ineluctable in a world that runs on systems and patterns. The ‘normal pulse of history’ is the undercurrent that has caused the Second World War, one that is defined by the inability of people and governments to see beyond the superficial and political. Most of the blame for this mutually destructive stalemate, in Naimy’s view, falls on the West for its devotion to materialism and science, without considering the spiritual needs of humankind. In *at-Taw’amān*, Naimy asserts that science is only a phenomenon to be used in daily life for the betterment of people’s lives – but it is not, crucially, something in which people can place

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<sup>419</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (London: Penguin, 2008), pp.34-5.

<sup>420</sup> Richard Hare, ‘Tolstoy’s Motives for Writing “War and Peace”’ (*Russian Review*, Vol.15, No.2 (Apr., 1956)).

their trust and love, like a force that controls the universe and understands the folly of human actions:

It is incontestable that the west has a deep preference for science, as it regulates, arranges and makes itself available, to the idea of the east and the west together. Whether intentionally or not, it is addicted to transposing what cannot be felt into the realm of sensations, or what is in the field of insight into the field of vision, because most people, broadly speaking, do not *believe* in electricity, other than seeing the lights in their homes.<sup>421</sup>

Tolstoy and Naimy both recognised that fundamentally the human race was stuck in a merry-go-round of war, followed by peace, followed by more war.<sup>422</sup> In Naimy's tongue, the world is 'frozen,' a word he liked to use to explain the essential inactivity of peoples who concentrated their mental activities on the wrong target.<sup>423</sup> For both writers, one of the consequences of this frozen nature of society was that there were certain peoples in the world who, on account of the balance of political power, would find themselves downtrodden and at the mercy of those in power. For Tolstoy, this was definitely a problem that afflicted the Russian peasantry in general<sup>424</sup> and the subjects of his adopted cause in the late nineteenth century, the Doukhobors, in particular.

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<sup>421</sup> *At-Taw'amān*, p.160 (italics mine).

<sup>422</sup> It may be useful to think here of the visual metaphor at work in the painting *Merry-Go-Round* by Mark Gertler (Tate collection, 1916), which was a reaction to the First World War and the seemingly endless cycle of destruction and horror it perpetuated.

<sup>423</sup> Naimy talks of the relationship between east and west as being 'frozen' on p.154 of *at-Taw'amān*, thus reminding us of his poem *al-Nahr al-mutajammid* (and the chapter in *Sab'ūn* I of the same name), based on his perception of Russia. The word frequently figures in many of his other works.

<sup>424</sup> See David Moon, 'Peasants and agriculture,' from Dominic Lieven (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Russia, Vol.2: Imperial Russia, 1689–1917* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

## Justice and The Global Economic Position of the Arab World

Naimy's audience confronted problems of a different social structure from that which afflicted the Russian peasantry, but they nevertheless faced the prospect of becoming as serfs in a global economy. In spite of recognising this fundamental flaw in the global economy, Naimy proclaimed in *at-Taw'amān* that the problem was more one of national perception and that the solution lay in a deeper comprehension of higher spiritual realities:

What is the link between ruler and ruled other than a chance occurrence governed by accidental circumstances in a mysterious world that consequently attaches people to their stations and to their secrets, and the state to its origins and neighbours. For the ruler yesterday will become the ruled tomorrow.<sup>425</sup>

Here, we see a Christian facet of Naimy's political thinking process (and also a seeming contradiction of his *an-niẓām al-kaunī*). Like Tolstoy's arguments against the warlike actions of certain governments, especially his own state of Russia, Naimy's observations on the illusion of power was inseparable from his understanding of the Christian faith and how it had to remain an active component in any modern *Weltanschauung*.

Despite his conviction that the current global state of affairs, with a warring west that, irrespective of how many of its children died on the battlefields, refused to acknowledge the prophets and spirituality of the east, would inevitably come to an end, and regardless of his prediction that the east was poised to rise up again and take a respected place in the world – the title of the final sub-chapter is *A Rising East and a Waning West*, punning on the

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<sup>425</sup> *At-Taw'amān*, p.164.

Arabic names for the two compass points (*Yašruqu al-šarq wa yaḡrubu al-ḡarb*) – Naimy uses a lot of tropes that betray his suspicion that the status quo is likely to last. Chief amongst these is the idea of circularity, represented in his usage of the word *daur*. Naimy mainly employs the word *daur* to mean a role or part played by humanity, the east or the west, but it is also intended to invoke the sense of a circle and reciprocity: the idea that the west's materialism and global supremacy is complemented the east's spiritualism and acquiescence to the hierarchy.

Building upon what we have discussed already, Naimy employs another trope in the essay to work as an arbitrator of political events and their effect upon his community. The Arabic word *'adl* (justice) is utilised widely in the essay to denote a justice system that ideologically sits above a courtroom mechanism in which issues are tried, as in this example:

The purpose of my words about these matters isn't anything more than a quick preface to the thought that constitutes the kernel of my talk, which revolves [*tadūru* – see above] around the injustice of the balance between the east and the west; these twins, even comrades, of humanity are scales in their balance. This defect seems to turn the flow of the west into an ebb, and the ebb of the east into a flow, and the vanguard of this transformation does not worry about insight.<sup>426</sup>

The Arab-centric focus, largely sympathetic to the east, of *at-Taw'amān* and the rest of the *al-Bayādir* collection is possibly reflective of their origins as scripts that were initially broadcast on Arab radio. Naimy was appealing to an audience that was questioning the Arab world's position in a global economy

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<sup>426</sup> *At-Taw'amān*, pp.173-4.

and asking why their lands, even after the four-hundred year rule of the Ottoman Empire had come to a conclusion,<sup>427</sup> continued to be subordinate to foreign empires, especially when those foreign powers were intent on destroying one another. War provides a wealth of material for writers; the Second World War provided a fertile source for Naimy's creativity (much in the same way that the Napoleonic invasion had served as an inspiration for Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and for Arabic literature in Egypt in 1798) and focused the attention of his listeners on the larger global political context.

This strong sense of justice, on the other hand, that the global system of politics and capitalism was geared to the advantage of the West, and inevitably reduced the East to a servile status, is a view that was shared by the Soviet scholar Aida Imangulieva in her work *Jibrān, Rihani and Naimy: East-West interactions in early twentieth-century Arab literature*. In the work she argued that many of the emigrations that took place from the Levant to the Americas were partly the result of an ideological stance the Arabs undertook. Levantine Arabs moved to both South and North America in the hope that their dreams of a just society may be materialised there:

By the end of the nineteenth century, mass emigration had begun to the Americas, and in particular to the USA. Among the emigrants were many highly educated people, who spoke Russian and European languages and had been exposed to progressive Western European ideas. Their activities in exile were an organic response to the

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<sup>427</sup> It is obviously difficult to give a precise figure for the whole of the Arab world, but Syria, Egypt and western Arabia were conquered by the Ottomans in 1516-17, hence roughly four hundred years of rule until the end of the First World War (Hourani (1991), p.215).

demands of an emerging nation as it moved into a new stage of historical development.<sup>428</sup>

Although this hypothesis conflicts with the primacy given by Naimy to the financial reasons for exile amongst his family and wider community, ideological factors have to be considered in assessments of demographic transitions out of the Levant, and especially out of rural Lebanon. Naimy's writings about the global context attempted to intellectualise the discontent and bracket the anger within a political commentary on the hierarchical structure between east and west. Between the first and third worlds, however, lay another option for Naimy to ponder: the second world of Communist ideology, which he discovered in one of later works.

### **Naimy's Return to the Different World of the Soviet Union**

Mikhail Naimy maintained relations with Russia after his departure in 1911, not through visits to the country but by upholding his interest in both Russian literature and in the politics of the country that had been his home for four years. In fact, we know from the essays that he printed in the Marxist literary journal *at-Ṭarīq* and by the collection of literary essays that constituted *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, all of which showed a strong gravitation towards the literature and politics of Russia, that Russia remained an arena of interest for Naimy until he died.<sup>429</sup> He also continued to correspond with academics in Russia who had shown a keen enthusiasm for modern Arabic literature, notably the

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<sup>428</sup> Imangulieva, p.19.

<sup>429</sup> A letter stored in the RAN archive in St Petersburg from Naimy to the Russian Arabist Anna Dolina shows that Naimy was still capable of writing in Russian at the age of ninety (St Petersburg Academy of Sciences Archive, Ph.1026).

inimitable professors Ignaty Krachkovsky<sup>430</sup> and Palestinian-born Klavdia Ode-Vassilyeva<sup>431</sup>. When a delegation of Russian academics arrived in Lebanon in the late 1940s, Naimy met with them but was greatly disappointed not to be able to meet his mentor Krachkovsky due to the latter's ill health. Krachkovsky died shortly afterwards, in 1951, and this sudden reminder of the ephemeral nature of life may have prompted Naimy to consider revisiting the country that had so inspired him. In a chain of events illustrative to Naimy of *an-niẓām al-kaunī*,<sup>432</sup> Naimy was invited to Russia in August, 1956 by the Association of Soviet Writers in Moscow. Naturally, he accepted and the book resulting from his visit was called *Ab'ad min mūsūkū wa min wāšintun* (Beyond Moscow and Washington, 1957).<sup>433</sup>

What we find in *Ab'ad min mūsūkū wa min wāšintun* is not just a travel writer's account of a visit to a foreign country, but also an extended essay on the subject of *an-niẓām al-kaunī* and the unsuitability of both communism and capitalism to address the problems of the world as they stand. Communism, which had, since Naimy's departure from Russia, been installed as the ruling system for the country with an entire new administrative vocabulary, certainly fascinated him, but the main content of the book is rather more abstract, as

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<sup>430</sup> Krachkovsky's remarkable scholarship also covered classical and Quranic literature, but he is credited by many scholars (both Arab and non-Arab) as being the first western academic to take a serious interest in modern Arabic literature. See 'Umar Muḥammad, *Rossiya-Palestina dialog na rubyozhe XIX-XX vekov* (St Petersburg: Liki Rossii, 2002).

<sup>431</sup> Her original Arabic name was Kulṭūm 'Awdah, but she changed it when she married a Russian doctor and moved to Kronstadt (near St Petersburg) in 1913. A close colleague and personal friend of Krachkovsky, she later became a professor of Arabic language and literature at Moscow State University. See 'Umar Muḥammad and Anna Dolinina, *al-Istīsrāq ar-rūsī: rasā'il al-udabā' wa-l-'ulamā' al-'arab fī aršif maktaba al-'ulūm ar-rūsīya mulaf al-mustašriq iḡnātī krātškūfskī* (Um al-faḥm: markaz ad-dirasāt ar-rūsīya, dā'ira al-abḥaṭ wa ad-dirasāt, 1998) for more on her life and work.

<sup>432</sup> Literally meaning 'the universal system,' Naimy believed in a kind of cosmic, karmic order, wherein related events were consequentially connected to divine will.

<sup>433</sup> An account of Soviet Russia's reception of Central and Western European visitors during the interwar years can be found in Michael David-Fox's *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921-1941* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

the first chapters demonstrate. *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun* is an older writer's reaction to what he used to know as Russia and as such is an acknowledgment that both he and the country have changed enormously over the course of his long life. Consequently, Naimy uses his intellect to order what he encounters. We have a setting out of the philosophical skeleton upon which the rest of the thesis is built in the eponymous first chapter, where Naimy states that the world is divided into two halves – not east and west, this time, but between those who support communism and followers of capitalism.

These days humanity pelts one another with incalculable, opposing trends, two of which are the most prominent and forceful: communism, symbolised by Moscow, and capitalism, symbolised by Washington.<sup>434</sup>

The subsequent two chapters introduce aspects of communism to his Arab audience, an audience that Naimy believes probably shares his same ignorance of the finer details of communist ideology. In 'Communism and Heresy,' Naimy gives a personal account of what he understands by the communist system, explaining that its roots came not from political figures like Marx, Lenin or Stalin, but from 'a reaction to the present system of corruption... one that continues and will continue in the future.'<sup>435</sup> In pondering the concept of heresy, Naimy asks fundamental questions of monotheistic notions of God: asking whether He is merciful or vengeful, and, if He is omnipotent, then would Communism not be part of his grand design.<sup>436</sup> Ultimately, Naimy, sympathetic to the human need to find God within oneself,

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<sup>434</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.11.

<sup>435</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.21.

<sup>436</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.27.

states that ‘the power that the heretic draws upon to confirm his heresy is the same source of power that the believer draws upon to confirm his belief.’<sup>437</sup>

Investigations into the genuine markers of individual freedom are instigated in the following chapter: ‘Communism and Freedom.’ Underpinned by Ophitic Gnosticism which values the serpent in the Garden of Eden as instrumental in granting humanity its true potential,<sup>438</sup> and infused with notions taken from Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*,<sup>439</sup> Naimy once again argues that theosis is the only route to true freedom (‘freedom is represented by a factual thing in human nature that guides it and takes it to the greatest extent of its existence’<sup>440</sup>), regardless of the slogans developed by communism and capitalism. For Naimy, political systems alone do not lead to greater freedom and love, but it is the teachings of individuals that provides for greater human happiness, individuals noted for their spirituality as well as their intellect: Saint Francis of Assisi, Abu Bakr, Buddha, Lao Tse and the man who would seem to be the true prophet for Naimy: Tolstoy.<sup>441</sup>

Counterbalancing communism and capitalism is what Naimy calls ‘The Third Power.’ The third power is *an-niẓām al-kaunī* and this chapter can be read as a synopsis of the many spiritual expressions Naimy had explained in other literary works, concerning the power of karma, nature and theosis, the foundation of which was a devotion to the teachings of Christ, as can be seen

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> *Ab’ad min mūskū wa min wāšintun*, p.37. See also Nabil I. Matar, ‘Adam and the Serpent: Notes on the Theology of Mikhail Naimy’ (Journal of Arabic Literature (vol. 11 (1980)), pp.56-61.

<sup>439</sup> Naimy was interested in the concept of the Übermensch, as can be seen from his essay in *Fi al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, ‘Kāliq as-sūbirmān’ (Creation of the Superman), but ultimately this theory sat uncomfortably alongside Naimy’s empathy with the subaltern.

<sup>440</sup> *Ab’ad min mūskū wa min wāšintun*, p.35.

<sup>441</sup> *Ab’ad min mūskū wa min wāšintun*, p.37.

in the body of the text. Naimy's perception of humanity is of a body of people who become ever more aware of their spiritual potential; as more and more people approach the manifestation of theosis, so the need for nation-states and the false construct of borders will disappear as the utopian vision becomes real and humanity lives together in one contiguous whole.<sup>442</sup> Once again, the methodology and reasoning of Naimy in these sub-chapters is highly reminiscent of Tolstoy's logic and style in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, but is distinctly Naimy's own brand of spirituality. Naimy adopts the same tropes of fundamental Christian understanding and forgiveness of one's neighbours, the total rejection of violence both by the individual and the state, the egalitarian optimism coursing through the dialogue (a crux that ultimately led to his opposition to Nietzsche's theories<sup>443</sup>), these all lead towards the same rationalisation of humanity that pits the potential of the individual against the power of the nation-state. It is interesting to note in this context that Naimy continues, as we noted in the spirituality chapter, to use the Bible frequently as his point of reference for understanding human nature: citing the discovery of Moses to illustrate the non-accidental nature of the universe,<sup>444</sup> and stating that people reap what they sow in a universal system.<sup>445</sup> As in *at-Taw'amān*, Naimy reached the conclusion that individual potential would finally triumph in the universal system, yet he was hindered in this cold, factual analysis by his

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<sup>442</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.58.

<sup>443</sup> See *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, 'Kāliq as-sūbirmān,' pp. 17-23.

<sup>444</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.54.

<sup>445</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.57.

natural sympathy for the underdog or well-intentioned: the East in *at-Taw'amān*, and communism in *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*.<sup>446</sup>

### **Problematising Naimy's Universal System: His Ideas of Russia**

*Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun* betrays Naimy's utopian visions of a world without nations by outlining specifically his connections with Russia, a sentiment that Naimy claims transcends scientific explanation.<sup>447</sup> In the chapter '*Alāqatī bi-rūsiyā* (My Bond with Russia), Naimy outlines his connections with the country and makes it clear from the outset of the story that the narrative concerns Naimy's love for Russia, revealed in the epiphany of his childhood:

I was five or six years old when the Orthodox denomination in my birthplace, Baskinta, began carrying out construction work on a large building in the eastern part of the village. We children understood that the building was to be a 'Muskubiyya' school [...] The building was finished in 1896. When we moved to it, we felt like we were moving from hell to happiness.<sup>448</sup>

Education and literature are the two prisms through which Naimy understands and writes about Russia, and this becomes evident through the rest of *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*. Thus, Naimy's introduction to Russian literature is treated with the same kind of epiphany language as his reaction to the building of the 'Muskubiyya' in Baskinta. Naimy's years in

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<sup>446</sup> Further evidence of Naimy's naturally favourable disposition towards the idea of communism can be read in his essay, *Rūsīya allatī 'araftuhā*, from the collection, *al-Nūr wa ad-dajjūr*, in which he writes of his love for the Russian people and their respect for freedom.

<sup>447</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.61.

<sup>448</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.63 (Naimy's rhyming of *jaḥīm* with *na'īm* does not scan in English).

Poltava are treated with no less enthusiasm for the Russian language and literature, as he details the classic (and largely nineteenth-century rather than contemporaneous) writers with whom he fell in love: Gogol (especially his *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* and *Dead Souls*), Pushkin, Lermontov, Nekrasov,<sup>449</sup> Belinsky ('without contest the master of Russian critics'<sup>450</sup>), Gorky,<sup>451</sup> and Chekhov.<sup>452</sup> As Naimy later says, '[Russia's] culture seeped into my blood.'<sup>453</sup> It was also through literature that he came to appreciate a better understanding of the revolutionary social ideas of Kropotkin and Bakunin, who argued vehemently for individual liberty.<sup>454</sup> That said, when Naimy was in Poltava, the revolution of 1905 was 'still fresh in people's minds' and comrades warned him in hushed whispers that 'all in the land of palaces was not as well as one may hope.'<sup>455</sup> Most pertinently for the purposes of this chapter, it was reading Bakunin et al. that taught Naimy the principles of the French Revolution and the socialism that his comrades embraced.<sup>456</sup>

However, more than simply a catalogue of the essential works of literature that he read while in Poltava, Naimy relates his years in Russia within the framework of someone who, from his later vantage point, can now pitch his Russian experiences within a wider context of modernity and capitalism. Writing in the nineteen-fifties, Naimy can now understand and articulate the

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<sup>449</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.75.

<sup>450</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.77.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.78.

<sup>453</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.88.

<sup>454</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.80.

<sup>455</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, pp.79-80.

<sup>456</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.80.

political motives behind his comrades at Poltava talking to each other in Ukrainian in 1906, rather than Russian, within a context of self-determination for minorities and hierarchical hegemony.<sup>457</sup>

To propose, as Nadeem Naimy does, that the chief part of *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun* is simply a 'magnified' version of Naimy's short story *Akābir* (Bigshots, 1956), albeit in essay form, seems to miss some of the most important aspects of the work.<sup>458</sup> (*Akābir* narrates the tale of a small boy, Rashid, and his parents who live in abject poverty in the Lebanese mountainside, paying rent to an absentee landlord who lives an affluent lifestyle with his wife and daughter in the city. Upon hearing that the landlord will visit them, Abu Rashid and Umm Rashid prepare a meal within their limited means by slaughtering one of their livestock, treated as pets by Rashid who had invested so much emotional capital in them. The Rashid family are then maltreated and humiliated by the landlord's family who refuse to enter the squalor of their freshly tidied hut, take the remaining two animals as pets for their daughter and threaten the Rashid family with eviction over their unpaid rent.)<sup>459</sup>

*Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun* operates not only in a different literary genre, but formulates a radically different contract between the text and the reader, whereby the thoughts on the page are identified as Naimy's own rather than those of a created character. Symptomatic of this is the manner in which Naimy starts many of his sub-chapters. We have personal evaluations

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<sup>457</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.82.

<sup>458</sup> Naimy, Nadeem, op. cit., p.256.

<sup>459</sup> A collection featuring *Akābir* was published in Kiev in 1958 by the Derjavne Vidavnistvo Khoudojnoi Literaturi under the Ukrainian title *Znatni* (Nadeem Naimy, op. cit., p.252-3). N. Naimy goes on to note the Soviet Union was interested in the depiction of selfish modern society living on the labour and suffering of the lowest classes.

of his knowledge of communism ('It is right that here I must stress my ignorance of communism. I tried several times during my university days to read Marx's *Das Kapital*, but each time had to abandon it due to something like ennui or weakness of spirit'<sup>460</sup>), before he moves later on in the work to the autobiographical material that will substantiate – in the mind of the author – the ideas he proposes.

The content of the first four chapters of *Ab'ad* is rendered abstract in order to introduce the world-view of the writer who will recount his experiences in the next ten chapters. This is to say that it plots out the political ideology of the writer, so that he can relate his experiences in the Soviet Union in accordance with those convictions. Thus, his own adolescence in Poltava is narrated within a context not of nascent communist ideology, as might have been the case at the time, but against a backdrop of the futility of political systems.<sup>461</sup> Similarly, his recounting of his reading material, the Russian literature with which he fell in love while at Poltava, is structured through the text in order to fit in with his conceived socio-political ideology – one that which, with his modernist outlook, equates canonical Russian writers, such as Dostoevsky and Pushkin, with Ukrainian writers, such as Shevchenko, Kutlyarvsky and Korolenko, who have been more marginalised in western approaches to literature.<sup>462</sup>

Although Naimy may have claimed in other intellectual essays (most unambiguously in the essays of *al-Bayādir*) to have been opposed to the idea of nationalism and argued, although unconvincingly, the case that humanity

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<sup>460</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.20.

<sup>461</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, pp.86-7.

<sup>462</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, pp.153-4.

was progressing towards a future where national borders would be deemed irrelevant,<sup>463</sup> the rest of *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun* undermines those arguments by the mood of the text, one which consistently demonstrates an unerring fascination with Russia and its literature. (The American city is not mentioned a great deal, either by name or by what Washington represents: capitalism.) Naimy attempts to retain a position aloof from both communism and capitalism, but his life and works are indicative of his inability to do so. The creation, and demise, of the journal *al-Funūn* was a result of capitalist, market forces, whilst back in Lebanon, Naimy was unable to ignore the encroaching aspects of modernism and capitalism on his home village as the advent of lighting and cars demonstrated his society's ineluctable approach towards greater individualism.

Like Naimy's literary works, when looked at as an entire corpus that includes both the fiction and the intellectual essays, there is a conflict arising between his stated, explicit political and spiritual beliefs, when Naimy is enunciating his theosophical ideas and Tolstoyan concepts of universal understanding, and the personal world-view that can be read subliminally in the more narrative and descriptive passages. *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun* shows the same ideological opposition between an intellectual desire to eradicate hegemonic power structures, of which national borders are an intrinsic part, sitting uncomfortably alongside an evident love of one particular nation: Russia.

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<sup>463</sup> We consider here especially the overtly political essays from *Zād al-mī'ād* and *Şaut al-'ālam*.

Naimy's eulogising of Russia in *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun* amounts to an unconscious imagining of Russia's recent history.<sup>464</sup> For Naimy, there is no dilemma regarding the reinvention of Russia as part of the Soviet Union – a new alien alliance that has established itself upon communist ideology – because his text recognises a genealogical descent from Poltava, part of 'Little Russia' in 1911, and Russia in 1956.

Indeed, the indicators within the text show that Naimy thought of Russia's history as being continuous from the time of romantic literature, the early nineteenth century, to the present day.<sup>465</sup> This is interesting to the reader as it demonstrates how Naimy mentally pictured Russia and further problematises his relationship with communist ideology. Naimy's strident commitment to the essential equality of humanity could be interpreted as being communist in spirit – and Naimy was, to a degree, feted by the Soviet regime with translations of his works officially published by the Soviet Union<sup>466</sup> – and yet his praxis neither conforms to communist principles nor is overtly critical of the regime. Where Naimy does mention the communist system it is in a rather disengaged, impartial manner, such as in his description of the Soviet support of writers.<sup>467</sup> Naimy is impressed with such generous state support and astounded by the amount of copies of works that the state is able to publish – 'They [the Soviet writers' union] prepare their writers for publication, furnish them with riches and luxuries, even make sure their sales are appropriate by

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<sup>464</sup> See *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, pp.61-120, esp ch. 'alāqatī bi-rūsiyā.

<sup>465</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.67 passim.

<sup>466</sup> *Livanskie novelli* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo «Nauka», 1959) and *Moi sem'desyat let* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo «Nauka», 1980) were both translations of Naimy's works published by one of Russia's largest publishers.

<sup>467</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.153.

printing tens of thousands, even as many as hundreds of thousands, of copies'<sup>468</sup> – but he refuses to contextualise this observation within the wider political setting. There is no mention of the literary value of the books they produce, nor of whether they ought to be promoting communist ideology; it is, rather, an assessment that the dissemination of knowledge has been facilitated by the communist state.

Ultimately, Naimy's intention to pursue a literary odyssey around Russia and Ukraine is the final confirmation that Naimy has not flown to Moscow purely in order to see how communism works in the Soviet Union:

It occurred to me that all the traces, from cradle to grave, of this or that writer, in an artistic journey investigated in painstaking details and interwoven stories, could almost sing to you in narrating the epic of the writer. Therefore, of all the museums available I had to visit Tolstoy's museum in Yasnaya Polyana, Pushkin's in Leningrad, Dostoevsky's and Gorky's in Moscow [...]<sup>469</sup>

Naimy wants to visit an idea and a source of inspiration and it is this passion, which morphs frequently into nostalgia, for the country's literary heritage that directs his literary judgment, leading him to remark upon the people 'that he can see humility in their faces,'<sup>470</sup> and remind us of the sympathy / anarchy conundrum that his writings could never fully resolve.

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

<sup>469</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.154. There was a Dostoevsky museum in Leningrad which was arguably more famous than its Moscow counterpart because of the author's closer ties to the city. It is unclear, therefore, why Naimy cites Moscow for Dostoevsky.

<sup>470</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun*, p.155.

## Conclusion

As intriguing a text as it remains, *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšintun* does not function particularly well as a cohesive literary work. Naimy's decision to break through the generic boundaries set by the philosophical essay produces an awkward book that seems to look as if it should be two separate works. Notwithstanding the comprehensive nature of *Sab'ūn* as a literary text, *Ab'ad* still gives us a unique angle on Naimy's relationship with Russia and Russian literature.

As so often with Naimy's works, however, what is concealed by the text of *Ab'ad* is as frustrating as its written details are illuminating. Naimy's stark refusal to use his pen to commentate on the political matters of the day is a brutal obstruction to those of us who display a natural desire to know how great thinkers see events. Some intellectual essays come out of great events and we have covered the relevance of the Second World War to *al-Bayādir's* inception in some detail, but very rarely does Naimy a detailed commentary on the political events happening in the Arab world or anywhere else. Instead, Naimy's essays often seem to stand outside time and context, occupying a space wherein only the spiritual potential of the individual is paramount.

Nevertheless, both *Ab'ad* and *al-Bayādir* imply a context that was highly relevant to his contemporary Arab readership in a wider global political and economic sense. For a comparison of literary technique, we can turn to a thinker such as Frantz Fanon, who in 1961 gives his lucid assessment of the Arab condition in Algeria, articulating the problems faced by the Arab, whose situation is one of subjugation to a colonial oppressor:

This world divided into compartments, this world cut in two is inhabited by two different species. The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality and the immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species. In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.<sup>471</sup>

This underlying tone – not only of the sentiment expressed by Fanon above, but also that of a Marxist associative interpretation of the essential *injustice* of such a situation – pervades so much of Naimy's most remarkable short stories and plays, from frustrated 'sons' forced to pursue outmoded traditions in *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, through characters dispossessed of money and spirit in his *mahjar* short stories, to Pitted Face finding himself driven to self-destruction in *Mudakkirāt al-'arqaš*. Injustice drives characters in both Naimy's fiction and the Russian fiction he was reading, whether it be through demanding the reader to assess notions of injustice through satire, as per Gogol's Chichikov, or morality, as per Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov. Ultimately, however, ideas of injustice are bound up for Naimy with human society, as we saw in his short stories, a solution for which could be found in his reading of Tolstoy who had fled the injustice of human society to set up a rural idyll in Yasnaya Polyana.

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<sup>471</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp.30-1.

Descriptions of a rural idyll lead us naturally to the novel that Naimy said was the climax of his philosophical thinking. *Mirdād* offers a solution to Naimy's geopolitical dilemma that is typically abstract and spiritual, but also speaks of a personal, spiritual fundamentalism that was shared in different expressions by Tolstoy, T. S. Eliot, William James<sup>472</sup> and, of course, Kahlil Gibran. The community that lives high up on Altar Peak, leading a shared, common existence that bears apparent parallels to communism and pledging allegiance to Noah and the tradition of the Ark, could be said to be where Naimy's political and religious convictions collided in the clearest manifestation of where his intellectual pursuits had led him. As we have remarked earlier, the community on Altar Peak has significant similarities to the Doukhobors, the religious community about whom Tolstoy had written (and with whom engaged politically) earlier. Naturally, the two coincide in terms of their religious thinking, but there are also political inclinations that unite the two groups.

How one might describe the political convictions of both the Altar Peak community and the Doukhobors is as being the most fundamental interpretation of communism. Obviously, our first coordinate for attaching such a moniker to the groups is their economical position. Both aspire to be entirely self-sufficient and both make a strict rule of distributing their goods equally. *Mirdād's* proscription of the community making any profit for themselves from the 'Day of the Vine' celebration could be read both as a fictionalisation of the teaching of Jesus ('it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle,

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<sup>472</sup> See especially William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Routledge, 2002).

than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God'<sup>473</sup>), and as an allegory of how the Doukhobors (and communism) prohibited the greed of capitalism.

Our second and final point of reference is the closed nature of the Mirdād, Doukhobor and communist societies. We see how in all three there is an unwillingness to share in alternative ideologies. Their societies, in their purest forms, are closed to alien influences and other teachings and thus restrict the freedoms of their members: absolute adherence to stated rules leads to the creation of a totalitarian state. Naimy did not seem to approach this paradox in his works. Indeed, he seemed to genuinely believe in the goodness of societies, like the Doukhobors and even, to an extent, the Soviet Union, to further the welfare of its citizens. Naimy might even have believed that the Mirdād society was possible, but in an evaluation of his literary texts it seems to us that he knew the current hierarchical economic power structure was likely to continue and pledged his personal support to the Arab world accordingly.

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<sup>473</sup> Mark 10:25 (KJV).

## Chapter Three

### **Russian Modes of Expression in Naimy's Fiction**

#### **Introduction**

The previous two chapters have dealt with the themes that have made their presence felt in Naimy's prose works and their dialogical relationship with Russian literature, the most prominent of which have been spirituality and politics. Our analysis of Naimy's prose has led us to the conclusion that these themes have risen to prominence in his literary texts through Naimy's context and background, and that his reading of certain Russian authors and their communication of ideas concerning, amongst other topics, the subjugation of the lower classes of society and how best organised religion could be accommodated within a modern political structure, issues as relevant for Russia as for the Arab world, assisted in the formulation of Naimy's literary expression.

This chapter will move away from an analysis of the themes while remaining close to the initial conjecture that was at the origin of this thesis: that is, if it can be agreed that dialogising with Russian literature was essential to Naimy's development as a writer, then what are the parameters for definition of the term 'Russian literature' and how do they manifest themselves in Naimy's texts? As mentioned in the general introduction, key works on the evolution of modern Arabic prose literature, such as Sabry Hafez' *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, have cited the importance of Russian literature in the development of a modern prose style, particularly with reference to the short story:

The impact of Russian culture and literature on the Arab cultural scene in the last century has been singled out here for detailed discussion because of the vital role it played in the genesis of narrative discourse. As we shall see in the following chapters of this book, Russian literature was adopted by many writers as the model for their literary endeavour. It is therefore necessary to study the history of Russian cultural influence and identify the channels through which it was transmitted.<sup>474</sup>

Hafez charts the dialogical process between nineteenth century Russian literature and early twentieth century Arabic literature, detailing the translation process (from Russian into Arabic) and specifying the Russian authors who were clearly in the spheres of cultural consciousness of the pioneers of the Arabic short story. However, Hafez' sociological study concentrates on the Arab world and its social development at the start of the twentieth century, examining how social and political factors contributed to the favourable conditions that nurtured the birth of the Arabic short story. I want to concentrate on the *literary* dialogue between Russian and Arabic literature, looking at how Russian writers expressed themselves and attempted to articulate a sense of reality in their texts, and how Naimy reacted to and interpreted them. By way of introduction to how Naimy valued the expression of a type of reality in his literary works, we can quote from his biography of Ḳalīl Jibrān, in which Naimy states lucidly and cogently his approach towards writing and representing reality:

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<sup>474</sup> Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (London: Saqi, 1993), p.91.

It was after much hesitation that I decided to write this book. For I believe that no man can faithfully, accurately and fully describe a single instant of his own life in all its intricate meanings and its infinite connections with the universal life. How, then, is one, no matter what his talents, to put between the two covers of a book the life of another man, be he an idiot or a genius!<sup>475</sup>

Naimy comprehended the ramifications of this passage for his portrait of Jibrān Ḳalīl Jibrān and the consequences such an approach would have for his readership. For, as he writes about his biography, there is no room in modern literature for a sentimental portrayal that bears no resemblance to reality:

Shall I be a traitor to Jibrān and to myself and draw of him a picture with no balance between its lights and shadows to please those of his readers who have no taste in art and no power to pry deep into life?<sup>476</sup>

Naimy's work is, as Lejeune noted in his remarks on the nature of the autobiography, an attempt to establish the *identity* of the man whose name appears in the title of the work: Ḳalīl Jibrān.<sup>477</sup> However, in spite of his proximity to his subject, Jibrān, and the accurate mapping of a number of milestones seemingly essential to understanding Jibrān's life and art, Naimy would have had to concede that his is only one of many truths about Jibrān and that there is still a strongly fictional element in the narrative, in its clear

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<sup>475</sup> Mikhail Naimy, *Kahlil Gibran: a biography* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1985), p.7.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid.

<sup>477</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989): for Lejeune, the name on the cover is everything. 'The autobiographical pact comes in very diverse forms; but all of them demonstrate their intention to honour his/her *signature*. The reader might be able to quibble over resemblance, but never over identity ("identicalness"). We know all too well how much each of us values his/her name.' (Lejeune, 1989, p.14.)

plot development and natural chronological progression of a man's life, that can tell us more about Naimy's approach towards the representation of reality in his prose.

When Naimy began to publish his prose texts that constituted such a representation of reality in *al-Funūn*, he was working in a context of Arabic literature that he described in *al-Ġirbāl*<sup>478</sup> and in *Sab'ūn*<sup>479</sup> as being in the dark ages, as if no Arabic prose tradition existed up until the twentieth century. Although we can largely disregard allegations of a void in Arabic prose literature and in the development of a modern Arabic narrative prose style before the twentieth century,<sup>480</sup> there are certain aspects of nineteenth century Russian literature that, together with the rise of the literary journal and the social, political and economic context of the Arab world, combined favourably to provide a seed-bed for Naimy's first blossoming as a writer.

Adopting a Bakhtinian approach to Naimy's style, we have to conclude that context is vital to discussing his literary texts. As previously analysed, Naimy's exposure to Russian literature and its ideas is essential to understanding the context of his literary texts. However, to comprehend how Naimy reacted to his environment through his literature and the modes of expression he chose to practise, we should first consider this quotation from Lukács:

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<sup>478</sup> Many of the essays in *al-Ġirbāl* deal with the conservatism Naimy perceived in Arabic literature and its inability to engage with modernity. Tropes of light and darkness are used frequently, but also employed is the trope of nascence and infancy, such as Naimy's claim in *ar-Riwāya at-tamīliyya al-'arabiyya* (*The Arabic Play*) that 'Our "literary renaissance" is still in swaddling-bands,' (p.31). These themes are explored more fully in the following chapter.

<sup>479</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.230 gives one of many examples in which Naimy says that Arabic literature 'in the real sense' does not exist. He also expressed the same sentiments in a letter to the Russian Arabist, Ignaty Krachkovsky (St Petersburg Academy of Sciences Archive, Ph.1026).

<sup>480</sup> Hourani (1983) and Badawi (*The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992)) both point, as we have in this thesis, to the Napoleonic expedition of 1798 as being a key year in the development of modern Arabic prose and thought, but studies by Allen (1998) and Hafez (1993) trace an Arabic prose tradition back much further. All dispute, as do other significant reference works too numerous to cite here, Naimy's condemnation of Arabic literature as being in the dark ages.

It is a condition sine qua non of great realism that the author must honestly record, without fear or favour, everything he sees around him. This subjective condition of great realism may require a more exact definition. For the merely-subjective candour of the realist writers survived the decline of realism itself, but could not avert the consequences brought about by this decline in the sphere of art and philosophy. The subjective honesty of the writer can engender true realism only if it is the literary expression of so extensive a social movement that its problems drive the writer to observe and describe its most important aspects and on the other hand stiffen his backbone and give him enough strength and courage to fertilise his sincerity. Such great historical movements are by no means simply covered by the trite conception of 'progress.'<sup>481</sup>

The first part of the quotation deals with the decline of realism not only in European literature, but in art and philosophy – something that had important repercussions for the authors that Naimy read. In her study on realism in literature, Pam Morris notes that historically there has been recognized a connection between literary 'realism' and the Enlightenment, which represented 'the positive epistemology as expansion of knowledge that underlies realist writing.'<sup>482</sup> The idea that all facts could be expressed in literature and that all human phenomena could be reduced to scientific, rational explanations was challenged by German romantic thinkers of the early nineteenth century, such as Schelling and Hegel, who correspondingly

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<sup>481</sup> György Lukács, *Studies in European Realism: a sociological survey of the writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, Gorki, and others* (London: Hillway, 1950), pp.137-8.

<sup>482</sup> Pam Morris, *Realism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p.12.

had a great effect on the intellectual processes of great Russian writers who rejected Enlightenment thinking. The Russian writers of the nineteenth century attempted to express indeterminable aspects of human life and experience, the argument for a benevolent God, say, in their literary works. To quote Berlin on this subject: 'What were the non-scientific modes of explanation which could explain life, thought, art, religion, as the sciences could not?'<sup>483</sup>

However, as Morris goes on to explain (and we shall consider later) realism is a highly tricky concept to define and, as literature has developed through the twentieth century, our perception of what constitutes realism has had to be broadened to accommodate a plethora of literary, linguistic and philosophical viewpoints. Fundamentally, however, at its widest definition:

[L]iterary realism, as I have defined it, is distinguished by its implicit contract with the reader that it does refer in some way to a world beyond the text.<sup>484</sup>

This wider understanding of realism will be central to dissecting Naimy's literary works and their context. As Naimy's works engaged in a dialogue with Russian literature of the nineteenth century, the philosophical context of their inception will also be vital for a fuller understanding of Naimy's modes of expression. As a more impartial observer than either Naimy or myself of the development of Russian modes of literary expression, Auerbach captures the peculiar circumstances of the evolution of Russian literature and highlights the

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<sup>483</sup> Berlin (2008), p.157.

<sup>484</sup> Morris (2003), p.142.

facets of its development that were most pertinent to Naimy's progression as an artist:

It seems that the Russians were naturally endowed with the possibility of conceiving of everyday things in a serious vein; that a classicistic aesthetics which excludes a literary category of "the low" from serious treatment could never gain a firm foothold in Russia. Then too, as we think of Russian realism, remembering that it came into its own only during the nineteenth century and indeed only during the second half of it, we cannot escape the observation that it is based on a Christian and traditionally patriarchal concept of the creatural dignity of every human individual regardless of social rank and position, and hence that it is fundamentally related rather to old-Christian than to modern occidental realism.<sup>485</sup>

Both Lukács and Auerbach view Russian literature as a specific entity that responds in an individual way to its society and environment, something that Naimy understood when he responded to his reading of Russian literature through writing his own original texts. The second part of Lukács' quotation recognizes to some extent the multifarious nature of literary realism and brings the discussion round to the position of the author, their social context (in our case, that of the Arab world and its comparisons with Russia) and the purposes behind the writers' works. Our goal here will be to examine to what degree Naimy expressed in literary terms extensive social movements and how they related to the literary expression of comparable social movements in Russia, focusing on some of the same Russian writers that occupied Lukács'

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<sup>485</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.521.

study, but also looking at the main medium which allowed Naimy to present his literary vision of reality, the literary journal, and its direct precursors in Russia.

### **Arab Literary Journals at the Turn of the Century**

Naimy first managed to gain a wider audience for his literary texts through the pages of the *mahjar* journal, *al-Funūn*, established in New York in 1913 by his fellow alumnus from the Nazareth Seminary, Nasīb 'Arīḍa. Naimy received the first copy of *al-Funūn* in the spring of his second year at university in Walla Walla, and later recorded the excitement it gave him:

What was it that struck me when I opened the first issue? My eyes tried to race ahead of my hands in turning over the pages and voraciously gobbling up what was on them. My heart beat with joy against my ribs.<sup>486</sup>

The arrival of *al-Funūn* was vital to Naimy's development as a writer for a number of reasons. Firstly, while his education up until this point had made him aware of the riches of Russian, and later English, literature,<sup>487</sup> he had yet – according to *Sab'ūn* – to be excited by what he had read of Arabic literature. Instantly, *al-Funūn* changed this. Naimy recounts with elation reading the first item in *al-Funūn*, a poem by Jibrān Ḳalīl Jibrān entitled *Ayyuhā al-lail*: 'I was overjoyed by a pen that knows the value of a word and does not wear it out with common service.'<sup>488</sup>

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<sup>486</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.34.

<sup>487</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.30: 'I approached reading the titans of English literature with the same avarice that I had approached reading Russian literature.'

<sup>488</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.35.

However, it was the journal's concentration upon Russian literature that especially impressed Naimy. Not only was there the poem '*Amānī*' – written by 'Alif' which Naimy understood to be a *nom de plume* of 'Arīḍa himself – which Naimy declared was 'the type of poetry that Nasib had acquired from his Russian readings,'<sup>489</sup> but there was the gravitation towards Russian literature in its translations of short stories:

The editor of *al-Funūn* had stuffed it with translations of poets and writers from Russia, especially their more contemporary writers like Gorky, Andreev, Sologub and Merezhkovsky, alongside some western writers like Oscar Wilde and Victor Hugo.<sup>490</sup>

The first edition of *al-Funūn* also included a translation of a piece by a less contemporary writer, Turgenev. Such a diverse conjunction of Russian writers, the classic with the contemporary, the well-known with the obscure, in this first edition of *al-Funūn* is indicative of the attitude towards Russian literature adopted by the editor, 'Arīḍa. As we shall discuss in more detail later, *al-Funūn* treated Russian literature as a contiguous body of works, disregarding the different trends and movements to which, say, Pushkin and Sologub belonged by grouping them together under the 'translations' banner. If the contents of the first issue show anything, it seems to be that 'Arīḍa wanted to demonstrate to his Arab audience the wealth of literature in the world, especially in Russia, and how Arabic literature may learn from it in order to produce its own creative pieces.

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid.

<sup>490</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.36.

As we can see from the correspondence that is reproduced in *Sab'ūn*, 'Arīḍa intended for Naimy to have a positive role in the success of *al-Funūn* as a serious, influential literary journal. 'Arīḍa had been aware of Naimy's talents both as an intellectual and as a literary critic from their time together at the Nazareth Seminary and wrote to Naimy, detailing his ambitious plan for him:

I am proposing to you that you read all of our writers from al-Yāzījī to now, and write for us an article about all of them separately, so that the audience can learn that they have achieved nothing but the banalities of all the eulogies, lampoons, and arrangements of empty, cumbersome speech that passes for literature. Perhaps you can be to us what Belinsky is to the Russians and Sainte-Beuve is to the French.<sup>491</sup>

'Arīḍa's ambition and faith in Naimy was rewarded when Naimy began to send him articles of literary criticism to be published in *al-Funūn*. Upon receipt of Naimy's latest article, *aš-Šī'r wa aš-šā'ir* ('Poetry and the Poet' (1, no.8, November 1913)), 'Arīḍa was positively effusive about Naimy's contribution not just to the literary journal but to modern Arabic literature as a whole:

Your pieces in *al-Funūn* touch directly on the wounds and suffering. The readers here are amazed by them, and I've witnessed that amazement. I hope, dear friend, that you apply yourself with zeal to more writing in honour of literature – in honour of the literary renaissance whose effects we are seeing. I will await an article from

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<sup>491</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.38.

you for each edition. I hope that you spare no effort in criticising the customs of this wretched community.<sup>492</sup>

The quotation is very interesting because of the insight that it gives us into how Naimy and 'Arīḍa considered the readership of *al-Funūn*. We have Naimy's testimony above stating that *al-Funūn* was intent on making the Arabic reading public aware of the treasure of Russian literature because both Naimy and 'Arīḍa considered Russian writers to excel in prose expression, but this truism compels us to imagine who their readership encompassed. 'Arīḍa speaks of witnessing the readership's amazement, so at once *al-Funūn* communicated with a local people: *mahjar* Arabs, perhaps predominantly from the Levant, living in New York. However, 'Arīḍa's blistering attack in the final sentence uses the Arabic word *umma* (community) to imply the wider Arabic reading public in the Arab world that was clinging onto, in his eyes, outdated customs that inhibited the progress of Arabic literature towards modernism. We have, through Naimy's critical articles that appeared in *al-Funūn* and in *al-Ġirbāl*, and through the editorship and vision of Nasīb 'Arīḍa, the construction of a distinct perception of the Arab world: Naimy and 'Arīḍa felt themselves to be separated from its tradition, hence their freedom to criticise the outmoded customs of the Arab world, yet they still considered themselves to be part of a wider community of Arabic-speaking peoples.

The intriguing part of this dialogue with the Arab world is that, and both Naimy and 'Arīḍa surely would have been aware of this, they were not alone in producing a literary journal that aimed to introduce its readership to modernism in prose literature and the possibilities of expression by publishing

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<sup>492</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.39.

Arabic translations of Russian literature. Five years before the first edition of *al-Funūn*, Naimy's former schoolteacher and alumnus of the Nazareth Seminary, Ḳalīl Baydas, published the first edition of his literary journal, *an-Nafā'is al-ʿaṣriyyah* (meaning 'Contemporary Treasures').

In his study of the modern short story and the effects of Russian literature upon Arab culture, Jihad Salih describes Ḳalīl Baydas as 'The pioneer of the modern Arabic short story and one of the first ambassadors for Russian literature in Arabic culture.'<sup>493</sup> Like Naimy, Baydas (born 1875) had learnt to speak and read Russian to an exceptional level while studying at the Nazareth Seminary. So much so, in fact, that in 1898, at the age of twenty three, he published the first Arabic translation of a Russian literary work: Pushkin's short story, *Kapitanskaya dochka* (*The Captain's Daughter*).<sup>494</sup>

However, it was with the inception of the literary journal *an-Nafā'is*<sup>495</sup> that Baydas managed to bring more examples of Russian literature to a wider audience more effectively, quickly and cheaply than the comparatively cumbersome task of publishing a book of short stories.<sup>496</sup> The economy of publication of the literary journal format was crucial to the success of both *an-Nafā'is* and *al-Funūn*, an aspect particularly valued by Nasīb 'Arīḍa. In addition to being a literary pioneer, 'Arīḍa was also a businessman, who had

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<sup>493</sup> Jihād Ṣāliḥ, *Ḳalīl Baydas: Rā'id al-qīṣṣa al-qaṣīra al-ḥadītha fī filasṭīn wa awwal saḥīr li-l-adab ar-rusī fī-t-ṭaqaḥa al-ʿarabiya* (Ramallāh: al-markaz al-filasṭīnī li-d-dirāsāt wa-n-naṣr wa-l-a'lām, 2005).

<sup>494</sup> Hafez (1993), p.95.

<sup>495</sup> The descriptive term *al-ʿaṣriyyah* was only added later in 1908 when the journal changed from a weekly to a fortnightly edition.

<sup>496</sup> Gary Marker, in 'The creation of journals and the profession of letters in the eighteenth century' from Deborah A. Martinsen (ed.), *Literary Journals in Imperial Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) notes a similar trend in eighteenth century Russia, when literary journals were first coming into being: 'Journals, however, afforded individuals a measure of financial protection against catastrophic losses, protection lacking in book publishing, where the negative consequences of an unfavourable cost/benefit ratio would be borne by a single author,' p.14.

spent time as a manager in his cousins' textiles factory before founding the 'Al-Atlantic Publishing Co.' in 1912.<sup>497</sup> 'Arīḍa understood that in a capitalist economy a literary journal had to be exciting in terms of its content, attractive to a readership, but, probably above all, economical to run. As a businessman who wished to disseminate Naimy's ideas about Arabic literature and to promote Russian literature to the Arab world, the literary journal was the best, perhaps the only, economical format that could spread concepts to a massive readership rapidly and directly.<sup>498</sup>

Baydas, although not a businessman, understood the power of marketing, too, as was demonstrated by his decision to add the moniker *al-'aṣriyyahh* (contemporary)<sup>499</sup> to the journal's title.<sup>500</sup> *An-Nafā'is* was marketed as 'an intellectual and literary journal'<sup>501</sup> that would be published weekly in a sixteen-page edition. Baydas here looked to Russian literary journals to provide a template for *an-Nafā'is*: contemporary Russian literary journals were invariably marketed in a similar fashion to *an-Nafā'is*, as 'literary-political' or 'artistic-literary' or some other such permutation to give an instant idea of its content.<sup>502</sup> Its relatively small size was intentional, allowing Baydas to produce

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<sup>497</sup> Nādirah Jamīl Sarrāj, *Nasīb 'Arīḍa: aš-šā'ir, al-kātib, al-ṣuḥufī* (Cairo: Dār al-ma'ārif, 1970).

<sup>498</sup> It should be stressed at this point so as to clarify the word 'economical' that, on account of its short lifespan, *al-Funūn* was probably not very profitable. An annual subscription to *al-Funūn* in 1916 was \$5 – not a huge amount even when allowing for inflation – and its advertisements, presumably a main source of revenue, were more scarce than in the far more durable *mahjar* literary journal *as-Sā'ih*.

<sup>499</sup> Possibly as a tribute to Pushkin's nineteenth century journal, *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary) (see Hafez (1993), p.152).

<sup>500</sup> It was a decision that seems to have been successful for the journal's circulation. Figures for distribution for pre-WWII Arab journals are difficult to gather, but Rashid Khalidi suggests that *an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* was 'popular' with prints running to hundreds, perhaps thousands, for each edition (*Palestinian Identity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) p.56).

<sup>501</sup> Cover: *an-Nafā'is* (Edition 1/Year I, 1908).

<sup>502</sup> The journal *Apollo*, for instance, had the subtitle 'an artistic-literary monthly' (John Delaney Grossman, 'Rise and decline of the "literary" journal: 1880-1917' in Martinsen (ed.) (1997), p.188).

the journal quickly and cheaply, and thus reflect more directly and immediately the social and political world in which it was being created.

The economics of production had dictated the size of the journals in both Jerusalem and New York.<sup>503</sup> In turn, their sizes would determine the genres that comprised the journals' content. Poems could be published easily, as could essays on a variety of topics, and both journals accommodated these genres. However, the genre that was best suited to the literary journal on account of its economical length and its ability to hold the reader in its intensity for a short period of time was the short story, a genre that was still relatively unexplored in the Arab world in 1908 (and even amongst the *mahjar* in 1913).

Both *an-Nafā'is* and *al-Funūn* were part of a wave of Arab interest in narrative fiction that manifested itself in the number of periodicals printed in the Arab world at the turn of the century that specialised in publishing translations of foreign fiction. As Hafez remarks, the shift in literary appetite and appreciation was fundamental and part of a wider change in culture that had taken place after 1798:

The common denominator in the interactive processes of cultural transition (which included the emergence of a new reading public, the change in artistic sensibility and the shaping of a different world-view) is the shift from the general to the particular and from the abstract to the concrete; that is from the inconclusive to the definite. The manifestation of this complex transformation in the field of literary

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<sup>503</sup> While *an-Nafā'is* started at sixteen pages long, it became larger as it got more established. The first run of *al-Funūn* published editions of around ninety six pages each, which would typically include over twenty separate items.

narrative is seen in the move from oral to written modes of presentation, and from collective creation to individual author.<sup>504</sup>

Readers, as well as authors, were becoming more sophisticated at the turn of the twentieth century and, as Hafez goes on to say quite bluntly, 'There was a boredom with the old stories, and a desire for new ones. The problem with folk and epic narrative is that the audience knows the story by heart.'<sup>505</sup> (However, we ought to bear in mind that the Russian critic, Boris Eikenbaum, posited the theory that the short story genre, though not hackneyed and familiar to the audience, was a 'fundamental, elementary' form that originated in folklore, anecdote and the oral tale.)<sup>506</sup> In spite of the desire for new stories, the reading public may still have been wary of the new genre of the short story, as Hafez explains:

Translation has to be widely read before an indigenous narrative writing appears, for it is easier to accept a translated text that runs against the established norms of literary taste than a native one.<sup>507</sup>

Therefore, literary journals provided the Arabic reading public with translations of Russian short stories before Arab writers produced their own indigenous versions of the genre. Russian literary journals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had partaken in a similar 'learning through translation process,' while *fin de siècle* journals continued to engage with new Western literature. *Severnij vestnik* (Northern Herald), for instance, had sought to promote the new European Symbolist movement in its issues: 'It

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<sup>504</sup> Hafez (1993), p.106.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid., p.107.

<sup>506</sup> Charles E. May, "Do You See What I'm Saying?": The Inadequacy of Explanation and the Uses of Story in the Short Fiction of Raymond Carver,' (The Yearbook of English Studies, Vol.31, 2001).

<sup>507</sup> Hafez (1993), p.107.

had been the journal's policy of spreading the latest foreign currents in literature through translated works.<sup>508</sup> Both *al-Funūn* and *an-Nafā'is* intended to and succeeded in promoting the short story, and both could draw upon abundant resources to provide the translations for their journals. Baydas tended to include generic Russian stories that would not introduce the reader to specificities of Russian culture or life, but rather entertained through their simplicity, intensity and clear, uncomplicated in plot development. Practically all of his stories were translated by alumni of either the Nazareth or Beit Jala seminaries. One such example was *Šahīdat al-ḥubb al-wālidī* (The Martyr to Paternal Love),<sup>509</sup> a heroic tale translated from Russian and set in thirteenth-century Padua, concerning an intelligent man who was sentenced to death for defending the rights of the inhabitants of the city. The translator of this story was a graduate of the Beit Jala seminary, Kulṭūm 'Awdah.<sup>510</sup> Other short stories translated were gothic-style horror stories and absurd tales, such as *Ġarābat al-aḥlām* (The Strangeness of Dreams)<sup>511</sup> and *al-Farah* (Joy)<sup>512</sup>. The first tale features a public prosecutor who checks into a hotel for the night and there has a horrifying dream, in which a husband and wife carry out a murder. The nightmare turns out to be a premonition as three years later he finds out that a couple have lured a rich man to the hotel, killed him and put his body in the stable in the manner in which they did so in the dream. In the second story, a young man who works for the government finds joy in the fact that a

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<sup>508</sup> Martinsen (1997), p.221.

<sup>509</sup> *An-Nafā'is al-ʿaṣriyyah* (5/II, 1910).

<sup>510</sup> See note 431 above.

<sup>511</sup> *An-Nafā'is al-ʿaṣriyyah* (17/I, 1909).

<sup>512</sup> *An-Nafā'is al-ʿaṣriyyah* (23/I, 1909).

newspaper's report on his public drunkenness has made him famous, or notorious, throughout Russia. He wakes up his sleeping family to inform them of the celebratory news.

All of the translations of Russian fiction in *an-Nafā'is* were appended with the translator's name and the phrase *min ar-rūsīya* (from the Russian), which designated the story's origin. However, neither the original title nor the author of the original work was given, and so the accuracy of the translation cannot be verified.<sup>513</sup> *Al-Funūn*, by contrast, worked in the exact opposite way: all of the original authors were detailed, but none of the translators. The decision to declare the names of the original authors may have been an attempt on the part of the literary critics at the journal to establish in the Arab readership's mind an identity that is attached to a particular author's style. Thus, instead of reading a whole group of short stories that were translated *min ar-rūsīya* (from Russian), the readers would be able to explore specifically how Pushkin, Sologub or Lermontov created their texts as writers. The change to identified authors allowed the readers of *al-Funūn* to acquire a greater sense of individual authors' modes of expression, but abandoned any ideas of a diachronic view of Russian literature in favour of a compilation by theme approach.<sup>514</sup>

In citing so much dialogue that took place between Baydas, 'Arīḏa, and the nineteenth century Russian 'thick' journals with regards to the intellectual and

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<sup>513</sup> This was a common practice amongst Arabic translators working in Arabic literary journals at the turn of the twentieth century; see Hafez (1993), 'Oral, Traditional and Translated Narrative' (pp.106-8).

<sup>514</sup> Russian literary journals of the nineteenth century also took a variegated approach to their contents, especially the 'thick' journals: 'This inclusive view of literature found an appropriate form in the thick journal. Verbalised reality in all its aspects could be represented in a variety of themes, styles, and genres, which complemented each other, at least ideally, between the two covers of each issue. But variety was expected to be coherent.' Robert A. Maguire, 'Introduction' from Martinsen (op.cit.).

literary material that comprised their issues, we must not overlook the fact that these journals were not created in a sociological void. The format of the literary journal in both Russia in the nineteenth century and the Arab world in the twentieth was often as a vehicle for view that were dismissive or contemptuous of authority, and that advocated principles that could range from anti-imperialist to socialist, or an amalgam of the two. Part of the reason for this, as we have stated above, is that editors of a literary journal did not have to worry so much about the economic considerations of a misjudging of public mood. If unpopular political views were printed in a book, or if the government of the day restricted its publication, then the author and printers would incur the losses of that whole particular volume. But the economics of publishing literary journals allowed for a greater degree of flexibility in their choice of material and political stances.<sup>515</sup> The political stance of *an-Nafā'is al-'aşriyyah* and other Arab literary journals<sup>516</sup> was interesting in that it seemed to see little difference between literary and social criticism, publishing articles on the political and social situation in the Levant alongside biographical articles on Russian writers, whose egalitarian principles the editor shared.<sup>517</sup> In doing so, Baydas was recalling the criticism of Belinsky that placed social issues and literature in the same sphere of criticism, and which had influenced a great many literary critics and the intellectual direction of many literary

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<sup>515</sup> Thus Belinsky was free to express himself honestly and openly in the literary journal *Teleskop* (The Telescope), allowing him to publish his *Literaturniye mechtaniya* (Literary Reveries) that may otherwise have struggled to find a publisher.

<sup>516</sup> Most notably, the literary journal *al-Ikā'*, which was edited by Salim Qubayn (another alumnus of the Nazareth Seminary and of the University of Kazan) and centred its material on Russian literature and social criticism. Its title, which means 'brotherhood,' reminds us of the values of the French Revolution.

<sup>517</sup> Such as articles on Gorky (*Maksim Gorky (an-Nafā'is al-'aşriyyah (6/VII, 1919))*), Tolstoy (*Min mufakkarāt Tūlstūī (9/VII, 1919)*) and, although not Russian still highly important to the Soviet project, Marx (*Karl marks (9/VII, 1919)*).

journals in Russia until the late nineteenth century.<sup>518</sup> In Russia, several changes would have to take place, the first of which was challenging Belinsky's principles, before entire journals could be devoted to literary and aesthetic matters, and the Russian modernist revolution could take its first initial steps.<sup>519</sup>

*Al-Funūn* also recalled Belinsky's principles of literary criticism,<sup>520</sup> but concentrated in its content much more on the literature alone, building up an idea of what the contributors and editor thought should comprise great literature and furnishing, through translations of Russian and other literatures, an environment that would be welcoming to the first attempts at creative, narrative prose written in Arabic by native Arab writers.

The final point to make about Arabic literary journals at the start of the twentieth century is that both *al-Funūn* and *an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* fostered a literary community between the journals themselves and their readerships that was vital to their survival and facilitated the introduction of so much new material to Arabic literature. *An-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* initiated the inclusion of a small section at the back of each edition, entitled *al-āṭār al-adabiyah* (Literary Writings), that, despite its name, did not solely list publications, but printed news items, notices and other assorted pieces of information that were relevant and interesting to its reading community.<sup>521</sup> *Al-Funūn* also encouraged

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<sup>518</sup> This is a view shared by John Delaney Grossman in 'Rise and decline of the "literary" journal 1880-1917' from Martinsen (op. cit.).

<sup>519</sup> Ibid., p.171.

<sup>520</sup> A fact that is admitted by 'Arīḍa's letter to Naimy quoted above.

<sup>521</sup> Two such notable items were a piece that informed the readership of how Ignaty Krachkovsky had found six translations of Tolstoy into Arabic (9/III, 1911) and another on the neglected state of millions of copies of books in socialist Russia (1/IX, 1922). Both tapped into the literary dialogue between the Arab world and Russia.

a sense of community with its readership through its editorials addressed to the *mahjar* community, and the interactive parts of its editions, such as the contests and affairs columns, that reinforced a constructed sense of identity between the readership and the literary journal.<sup>522</sup> It was in these conditions that Naimy wrote for the Arab public, using a variety of modes of expression that were informed by his reading of Russian literature, the most pertinent of which to the discussion here is the short story, which we shall examine now.

### The Opportunities of New York

Although he may have professed to detest New York for its relentless noise and bustle,<sup>523</sup> the symptoms of its exploitation of a capitalist economy, New York allowed Naimy's talent to develop and provided an invaluable source of literary inspiration. While in the United States, Naimy produced some of his greatest pieces of prose literature, most notably the short stories that make up the collection *Kān ma kān* (Once Upon a Time, 1937<sup>524</sup>).

Naimy's time in the USA was a time of unfettered creativity, when he not only wrote more without the self-censoring inner voice that had arisen out of his ideas on theosophy and the universal system, *an-niḏām al-kaunī*, that he believed controlled the cosmos, but also had a literary journal in his grasp through which he could publish the ideas on literature that were revolving

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<sup>522</sup> Literary contests were a feature of *al-Funūn* from its first edition and were also a constant in Qubayn's *al-Ikā'*, which furthered fostered the idea of a literary journal being at the hub of a community by including both women's and children's sections in its editions.

<sup>523</sup> Nadeem Naimy, p.158.

<sup>524</sup> This is the date of the first edition published by Maṭba'at al-Ittiḥad in Beirut; the dates for writing of the actual stories themselves are included in the texts and range from 1914 to 1925, during which time Naimy was living in Washington state and New York.

around his mental network of texts, based on Russian writers but recently augmented by his exposure to English literature through his acquisition of fluency in the language.<sup>525</sup> As we have detailed above, some of the stories in *Kān ma kān* were published in *al-Funūn*,<sup>526</sup> which had fortunately been established at the same time as Naimy was looking for an outlet for his literary talents,<sup>527</sup> and the proximity in print of Naimy's works to translated works of Russian fiction leads us to examine how his modes of literary expression were dictated by his reading of Russian literature in these instances.

*Sanatuha al-jadīdah* (Her New Year, 1914) is the earliest short story that Naimy published in any of his collections,<sup>528</sup> and described by one critic as a 'masterpiece.'<sup>529</sup> The short story relates the night when Shaykh Abū Nāṣif's wife went into labour, ready to give birth to their ninth child. However, the night, New Year's Eve of 1908, is fraught with psychological tension and nervous energy as the Shaykh has already had eight daughters and is sick with worry that this ninth child will turn out to be a girl, too. Nightmarish visions mix with real action so the reader is kept on a literary tightrope between reality and imagination, eagerly awaiting the end of the night and the revelation of what sex, and therefore what future, the child had.

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<sup>525</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, pp.16-23 ('*Lisān jadīd*') documents Naimy's struggles with the English language, while p.93 details how he received his Bachelor of Arts in literature from the University of Washington.

<sup>526</sup> *Al-Āqir* (The Barren One) in *al-Funūn* (II, 4, September 1916) and *aḍ-Ḍakīra* (The Treasure) in *al-Funūn* (III, 2, September 1917).

<sup>527</sup> It should also be mentioned at this point that Naimy was regularly contributing to *as-Sā'ih*, another literary journal established and run in New York by another member of the *mahjar* community, 'Abd al-Masīh Haddād.

<sup>528</sup> Another short story published earlier in *al-Funūn* (I, 7, October 1913) – *Li-majd al-maṣlūb* (To the Glory of the Crucified) – was not included in *Kān ma kān*.

<sup>529</sup> N. Naimy (1967), p.153.

We begin the short story with something almost like a digression, within which the subject of the narrative is not Abū Nāṣīf or another member of his family, but the village itself.<sup>530</sup> Naimy lulls his reader into a misconception about what is about to take place as he describes a kind of rural utopia, ironically emphasising the quality of its produce to accentuate the edenic aura of the village:

The village of Yarbūb is famous for many things. Everyone who knows that verse of King David, ‘ that wine that maketh glad the heart of man,’ will tell you of the excellence of its wine and arak. Every silk mill-owner in Lebanon will tell you of the superb quality of the silkworm cocoons that are bred in that village. A farmer who wished to buy a fine milking cow or a bull of great strength would turn first of all for Yarbūb, believing in his heart that he would find there what his soul desired.<sup>531</sup>

Naimy continues in this style to describe the young women of the village, ‘the daughters of his ancestor Eve,’<sup>532</sup> whose qualities far outstrip those of any other villages in the area, and thus the picture of an uncorrupted and blissful world is complete. This use of a bounded space that is at the beginning of the narrative detached from the outside world and whose harmony is destroyed by its most intimate participants is very reminiscent of Gogol’s works, not only *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*, but also *The Inspector General (Revizor)* and particularly the story *Old-World Landowners (Starovetskie pomeshchiki)*

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<sup>530</sup> The use of the digression in literature has been remarked upon by R.W. Hallett in ‘The Laughter of Gogol’ (Russian Review (Vol.30, No.4, Oct., 1971)), Northrop Frye in ‘The Four Forms of Prose Fiction’ (The Hudson Review (Vol.2, No.4, Winter, 1950)), and by numerous writers on African oral literature, such as Ogo A. Ofuani in ‘Digression as Discourse Strategy in Okot p’Bitek’s Dramatic Monologue Texts’ (Research in African Literatures (Vol.19, No.3, Autumn, 1988)).

<sup>531</sup> *Kān ma kān*, p.39.

<sup>532</sup> Ibid.

from the collection *Mirgorod*.<sup>533</sup> Naimy's description of the village emphasises to the reader that the setting is obviously rural (and definitely not the urban New York environment of many of his readers) and the quite innocent world-views of the characters expounded therein will correspond with their environment, another facet of the narrative that corresponds with Gogol's exaggeration of provincial attitudes in his own literary works.<sup>534</sup> Although we can imagine that both the bountiful and romantic attractions of Yarbūb are certainly exaggerated, the arena of discourse stays fixed within a specific way of viewing reality – its produce is nothing other-worldly, simply wine, silk and cattle, and the young women who live there are obviously not deities, yet this is an edenic place whose harmony and beauty is accepted. As the prescient reader would know, however, such hyperbole is expressed in order to bring the events that follow into the sharpest contrast.

As *Sannatuha al-jadīdah* continues, Naimy uses other Russian literary techniques. The first and most noticeable device to be employed in the text is the alignment of the environment with the mood of the main protagonist. Gogol often employed this feature in his own short stories to put across a presentiment, heavy with tension and fear, of an appalling event about to take place in the protagonist's world,<sup>535</sup> and Naimy does likewise in the studied text:

The storm screams and the sky weeps, and through this clamour  
you can hear from time to time broken screams coming from the

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<sup>533</sup> See Robert A. Maguire, *Exploring Gogol* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp.22-34.

<sup>534</sup> See Anne Lounsbery, "'No, This Is Not the Provinces!'" Provincialism, Authenticity, and Russianness in Gogol's Day,' *Russian Review*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Apr., 2005), pp. 259-280.

<sup>535</sup> Nils Åke Nilsson, 'On the Origins of Gogol's "Overcoat" from Elizabeth Trahan (ed.), *Gogol's "Overcoat": An Anthology of Critical Essays* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1982), pp.62-3.

windows of the house where the light shines. These cries from a human breast, cries for help: “O, Jesus! O, Virgin! O, St. Elias!”<sup>536</sup>

Implanting the stormy weather outside into the narrative, Naimy allows the thought to stay with us during the psychological trauma of Abū Nāṣif before repeating it to us at the end in order to remind us of the turmoil taking place in the protagonist’s heart and underscore the terror and drama of the night:

The winds are howling, the snow is falling, the trees are swaying and Abū Nāṣif is digging ...<sup>537</sup>

This use of the ‘pathetic fallacy’<sup>538</sup> has its correlative in Gogol’s earlier works which applied a similar juxtaposition of the weather to the mental outlook of a protagonist in order to create a specific mood in the short story.<sup>539</sup> We can think here of the metallic, humdrum grey sky echoing the stifling bureaucratic conditions of the characters that populate *Shinel’* (The Overcoat), or of the maddening snow and harsh frost cruelly accentuating the death of insignificant Akaky Akakievich in the same work, or of the relentless summer heat driving the eponymous protagonists to insane and violent confrontation in *Povest’ o tom, kak possorilis’ Ivan Ivanovich s Ivanom Nikiforovichom* (How Ivan Ivanovich Quarrelled with Ivan Nikiforovich), to see how he used such a technique in his own short stories:

A small porch with its roof supported by two oak columns adorned the front of the house: in the Ukraine this does not give much

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<sup>536</sup> *Kān ma kān*, p.45.

<sup>537</sup> *Kān ma kān*, p.52.

<sup>538</sup> A definition of the phrase with reference to the use of the weather in narrative can be found in Christine Clegg (ed.), *Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita: A reader’s guide to essential criticism* (Cambridge: Icon, 2000), p.120.

<sup>539</sup> The juxtaposition also reminds us of the short story *Ġarāba al-ahlām*, from *an-Nafā’is al-‘aṣriyyah* (17/1, 1909), which uses violent, stormy weather to create a tense mood for the piece.

protection from the sun, which at this time of the year is no laughing matter, soaking the traveler from head to foot in a warm sweat. From this you will appreciate how much Ivan Ivanovich wanted the rifle [of Ivan Nikiforovich], as he normally went out only in the evenings because of the tremendous heat.<sup>540</sup>

Furthermore, in the psychopathic tendencies that he displays, Abū Nāṣīf finds a close literary relation in Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov. Stripped down to the barest essentials of the protagonist's narrative, Abū Nāṣīf, like Raskolnikov, cannot afford to continue to lead his life as he has hitherto done without a significant change in his economic circumstances. In his deliberations over the outcome of the pregnancy, presented in the form of an inner dialogue, Abū Nāṣīf articulates his reactions to scenarios of both good and bad news:

Tonight is New Year's Eve and at dawn the news will spread of the birth of a son to the Sheikh. The village will come together, old men and children alike, to share in the joy. Welcome to them all, for Abū Nāṣīf will make rivers of wine flow and the slaughtered animals shall last for weeks or months.

But what if it were a girl?<sup>541</sup>

The tension, which is heightened by the banality of the setting and the characters, over the identity of the sex of the child is continued to the end of the story and, crucially for the development of the Arabic short story, even when it is revealed to have been a girl, it is never explicitly stated that Abū

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<sup>540</sup> Nikolai Gogol, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, trans. Robert Wilks (London: Penguin, 1972), p.117.

<sup>541</sup> *Kān ma kān*, p.48.

Nāṣīf murdered her at birth.<sup>542</sup> As a short story, *Sannatuha al-jadidah* has a conclusion that is closer to the 'open ending' that has become 'more or less the standard strategy'<sup>543</sup> of short stories in European and North American literatures in the twentieth century, and which was the hallmark of the culmination of a sophisticated discourse in twentieth century Arabic prose literature<sup>544</sup>:

The shaykh continues to beat his wife until she loses consciousness, and nowadays he does not allow her to leave the house. While he, the shaykh, that is, never again set foot on the grounds of the church of St Elias. Some even say that he renounced his faith and fled Yarbūb forever.

Yes, the village of Yarbūb is famous for many things!<sup>545</sup>

In this way, Naimy writes the short story for an Arab readership he believed to be not yet ready to receive a completely *open* ending (and so gives closing clauses for Abū Nāṣīf),<sup>546</sup> yet refuses to resolve the mystery altogether and allows some doubt in the narrative that may point to an open ending. It is a sophistication Naimy shows in the narrative that is closer to the open endings of Chekhov than to the neat conclusions of Tolstoy. Naimy, like Chekhov, leaves some narrative possibilities open to the reader, indicating his trust in the reader's sophistication and his ability to communicate with them, that

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<sup>542</sup> Although from the actions of Abū Nāṣīf at the end of the story, his inner torment and guilt signified by beating his wife, we are led to believe that this is the case.

<sup>543</sup> Helmut Bonheim, *The Narrative Modes: Techniques of the Short Story* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982), p.120, quoted in Hafez (1993), p.256.

<sup>544</sup> Hafez (1993), pp.255-9.

<sup>545</sup> *Kān ma kān*, pp.52-3.

<sup>546</sup> Hafez' example of the culmination of sophisticated discourse is Mahmud Tahir Lashin's *Ḥadīṯ al-qarya* (*Village Small Talk*), written and published in 1929.

shows a development from Tolstoy's inclination to tie up all the loose ends in the narrative himself.<sup>547</sup> Naimy's lack of didacticism and his capacity for creating an expectant mood in the narrative also assumes a parallel with earlier critical readings of Chekhov.<sup>548</sup>

The other short story that featured in both *al-Funūn* and *Kān ma kān* was *al-ʿĀqir* (The Barren One), which communicated starkly to the reader not only the romance and hope of marriage but also the dreadfulness of everyday life situations in the rural Arab world. Naimy told this through the story of a woman who becomes firstly a felicitous participant in, and then a miserable victim of, societal norms and expectations. At the beginning of the story, we find ourselves at a wedding notable for its serenity and are at once reminded of the utopian vision of the village of Yarbūb:

“I hereby pronounce you, ‘Abdullah ‘Aziz, and you, ‘Abdullah Jamilah, man and wife in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.”

The priest Paul uttered these words on the evening of the tenth of May, 1900 in the spacious, lavishly furnished and decorated hall of the home of Abu ‘Aziz al-Karbaj. The words in mute silence fell upon hundreds of guests to the wedding which was draped in a celestial reverence. All of them, the children, the ladies and young men, adults

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<sup>547</sup> This idea is developed by Valery Tiupa in ‘Communicative Strategy of Chekhov’s Poetics’ from J. Douglas Clayton (ed.), *Anton Pavlovich Chekhov: Poetics - Hermeneutics - Thematics* (Ottawa: Slavic Research Group at Ottawa, 2006), pp.1-20. The differences between Chekhov’s and Tolstoy’s prose works are also explored in V. B. Kataev’s *Proza Chekhova: problemi interpretatsii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moscovskovo universiteta, 1979), p.20 passim.

<sup>548</sup> Dmitri Chizhevsky describes Chekhov’s art as literary impressionism, citing also the attention to small details in the narrative that we can also see in Naimy, in his essay ‘Chekhov in the Development of Russian Literature’ (taken from Robert Louis Jackson (ed.), *Chekhov: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967)).

and the elderly, held their breath as they bent their ears towards the flutter of light wings.<sup>549</sup>

The narrative follows a pattern of recording a prelapsarian bliss that is punctured by society's demands on the main protagonists, 'Abdullah 'Aziz and Jamilah. In his short stories, Chekhov sought to be brief in his introductions so as to establish the conditions for the narrative's events quickly, concentrating more on the contemplative nature of the ending;<sup>550</sup> this is precisely what we can recognise in the poetics of Naimy's *al-'Āqir* and other short stories.

Jamilah has a life that is initially perfect with her marriage to a husband whom she loves. Gradually, however, the joy is shattered when she is unable to bear a child. Jamilah's husband and parents-in-law begin to resent her on account of her infertility. When, miraculously, she becomes pregnant, her whole world changes and the people around her begin to love her once more. Tortured with guilt over her infidelity, Jamilah writes a letter to her husband in which she confesses that the child is not his and that it is he who is infertile, not her – and then commits suicide. Naimy asks the reader to reconsider the role and rights of women in rural Arab society by giving a strong yet emotional voice to his main female protagonist, Jamilah, and emphasised in her letter to 'Abdullah:

You do not know how much hurt my injured heart suffered! And the first wound you inflicted on me was when I realised that your love had never been love for me myself, as a person, with a character and

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<sup>549</sup> Naimy, *al-'Āqir* (from *Kān ma kān*), p.55. Commentating on this story, C. Nijland remarks that the original version of the story, published in *al-Funūn*, 'depicts the priest as having wished the couple many children, and as having gone home in the best of spirits because he had pocketed ten pounds,' but that these anti-clerical sentiments were dropped from the *Kān ma kān* version.

<sup>550</sup> Avram B Derman comments on Chekhov's hostility towards superfluous extended introductions in 'Structural Features in Chekhov's Poetics' from Thomas A. Eekman (ed.), *Critical Essays on Anton Chekhov* (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1989), pp.34-44.

qualities of her own. What you loved in me was the future mother of your children, the female function, that before it died would leave you your descendants.<sup>551</sup>

For the character of Jamilah, Naimy enters into an intertextual exchange with the work of the Arab thinker, Qāsim Amīn, who had published *Taḥrīr al-mar'a* in 1899 and *al-Mar'a al-jadīdah* in 1901 (both in Cairo). Amin's ideas were predicated on a notion of the decay of Islam in the context of Darwinism, and he viewed the status of women in Arab society as a barometer for the health and strength of the society which they inhabited. The decay in Arab society was due to a lack of moral strength, which in turn was caused by ignorance – an ignorance rooted in the inadequate relations between man and woman, and between mother and child.<sup>552</sup> Education could solve this problem, while marriage, the subject of *al-Āqir*, needed to be reformed to guarantee women's status in society:

There can be no doubt that granting a man the right to imprison his wife denies her the freedom that is her natural human right.

The woman whose father handed her like an animal to a husband she did not know, and about whom she knew nothing because common knowledge prevents her from forming her own opinion, cannot consider herself free, but should in reality believe herself to be a slave. By custom, the majority of fathers in all strata of the *ummah* marry off their daughters in this way.<sup>553</sup>

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<sup>551</sup> *Kān ma kān*, p.83-4.

<sup>552</sup> Hourani (1983), p.165.

<sup>553</sup> Qāsim Amīn, *al-Mar'ah al-jadīdah* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-'ala l-i-ṭaqāfah, 1999), p.33.

In *al-Āqir*, Jamilah pleads with her husband not to be seen as simply a vessel carrying the next generation of his children, but to be considered as a human being with her own mind and rights – her plaintive appeals clearly blame the man’s actions for the tragic suffering of the woman, but also call for mediation and cooperation as the means to reform society. Amin’s feminist writings, however, were not the only literary sources that Naimy could draw upon for his depiction of the character, Jamilah. Naimy’s experiences in Russia, where Bolshevik revolutionary ideology afforded far more rights to women in a theoretically egalitarian society, and in the United States (and especially New York), where the emancipation of women had outstripped the Arab world, both informed his writing of *al-Āqir*. However, Naimy’s reading of Russian literature also provided a powerful impetus for this particular mode of expression.

For the Russian critic, Aida Imangulieva, the primary writer with whom Naimy engaged in the writing of his short stories was Chekhov. However, she offers a note of warning in comparing the two writers:

It should be remembered that the degree of artistic comprehension and endeavour were not commensurate for Naimy and Chekhov; there is also a typological divergence between the two writers. Naimy began to write at a time when Arabic literature had only begun to assimilate Realist methods, whereas Chekhov the story-writer had learned his art on the fertile soil of a fully established Critical Realism. The breadth with which reality is comprehended in Chekhov’s Realism is also well

known, whereas Naimy was only able to depict certain aspects of Arab reality.<sup>554</sup>

By the term 'Critical Realism,' we have to assume here that Imangulieva is talking about the trend of Russian realism that existed in prose in the mid to late nineteenth century, which, echoing the words of Morris quoted above, represented an external reality beyond the text, but was not part of the realist approach of the Enlightenment that believed all aspects of life and reality could be rendered almost like a scientific formula in the text. As stated above (although this necessarily has to be concise), Russian writers of the mid to late nineteenth century were also attempting to articulate in prose aspects of human experience, such as the epiphanic realisation of the existence of God and goodness in the world in the novels of Dostoevsky, that could not be reduced to scientific formula, and admitted that the actual life experience was superior to the art representing it. Imangulieva's idea of the tradition of Critical Realism conforms with Richard Freeborn's essay on the 'Realists' in Russian literature from 1855 to 1880:

The zenith of Russian realistic prose is treated here as beginning in 1855, a date of political significance, the year in which Nicholas I passed from the scene, but also of literary importance, as the year which saw the publication of Chernyshevsky's *Esthetic Relations of Art to Reality*. [...] Chernyshevsky's was a straightforwardly materialist esthetic, based on the central propositions that "the beautiful is life" and

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<sup>554</sup> Imangulieva (2009), p.174.

that art is in every meaningful sense inferior to a reality subject to rational comprehension.<sup>555</sup>

The Chekhovian school that had been built upon the aspects of 'Critical Realism' outlined above (although we must stress that Chernyshevsky is not the sole arbiter of aesthetics) is set within more apposite parameters by Imangulieva later in her work:

Generally speaking, the Chekhovian school is most evident in Naimy in the sharp social orientation of his stories, their realism and striking humanism, and their love and compassion of the human being. Naimy's stories are canvases of everyday life, morals, relationships, occupations and psychology of primarily simple people. They create vivid characters that belong to a certain setting and time. In portraying the life of the people, their troubles and needs, and the injustice of the social systems, he created a persuasive archetype of the Arab labourer.<sup>556</sup>

This is certainly true of many of the short stories that Naimy wrote after he had returned to Mount Lebanon. Aside from the Gogolian literary technique of 'laughter through tears'<sup>557</sup> that typifies some of the more slapstick elements of stories like *Hadīya* (The Present), the reader feels the love and compassion that Naimy felt for the human individual that Imangulieva describes above. Augmented by the everyday, almost banal circumstances that the characters find themselves in, there is a feeling in the collections of *Akābir* and 'Abū

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<sup>555</sup> Richard Freeborn, 'The nineteenth century: the age of realism, 1855–80,' from *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, Moser, Charles A. (ed.) (Cambridge: CUP, 1992).

<sup>556</sup> Ibid.

<sup>557</sup> See Richard Peace, *The Enigma of Gogol: An examination of the writings of N.V. Gogol and their place in the Russian literary tradition* (Cambridge: CUP, 1981): '[of *The Diary of a Madman*] it bears the recognisable Gogolian stamp of "laughter through tears,"' p.125.

*baṭṭah* that Naimy is trying to represent, with a great deal of sympathy, the Arab community that exists around him in Lebanon in the mid twentieth century, and in doing so is echoing the voice of Chekhov.

*Al-Bankārūliyā* (The Bancarolia), from *‘Abū baṭṭah*, which we shall take as our first example, looks at the phenomenon of exile in the Arab community of Mount Lebanon from the Lebanese, instead of the American, point of view. *‘Abū Šāhīn*, a poor and illiterate agricultural worker, sells all his goats so that his ungrateful son might be able to study and obtain the *diplome de baccalaureate*, which in theory would enable him to emigrate to the United States, get a good job, and repay his father many times over. In reality, what happens is that his son goes to the United States, cannot get any kind of gainful employment, and strips his father of his remaining assets by pleading for money while he is living out of the country. Aside from the obvious pointers in Naimy’s life for the short story’s content – his father’s emigration to, and subsequent failure to get a job in, the United States,<sup>558</sup> his own inability to find well-paid jobs in New York, and the Lebanese agricultural background of the narrative – the style of the prose bears the traces of Chekhov’s works:

*‘Abū Šāhīn* regretted it deeply as soon as he had taken the money and placed his hand in the hand of the buyer, as if to say, ‘Deal.’ He felt as if the mountain on which he was standing was about to collapse under his feet, as if his heart had suddenly sunk to the soles of his feet. His vision blurred and his breathing became so weak that it seemed as if it had almost stopped entirely – especially when he saw the flock moving further and further away from him, preceded by the buyer,

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<sup>558</sup> See *Sab’ūn* I, first two chapters.

urging it on in a language goats understand, and followed by the man's son, herding them now with a stick, now with a deftly-thrown stone.<sup>559</sup>

Adhering to Ellery Sedgewick's analysis of the short story in its being 'like a horse race. It is the start and finish that count most,'<sup>560</sup> then *al-Bankārūliyā* will tell us a great deal of where Naimy's mode of expression was heading and how his dialogue with Russian literature was continuing. Chief amongst these aspects is the use of laconism that Naimy had adopted for his later short stories. Our earlier examples from *Kān ma kān* set the scene for the main narrative with lengthy digressions, but in the opening paragraph of *al-Bankārūliyā*, we learn 'Abū Šāhīn's occupation, his state of mind, what he has just done in order to earn some money (which will in turn form the crux of the rest of the short story), and something of the character of the new owners of his beloved goats, along with other aspects of the narrative. Although there is some concealed irony in the letter to his brother, Chekhov's stress on laconism is apparent in his short stories:

In 1883, Anton Chekhov advised his brother Alexander on how to write a story that would sell to Leykin's *Fragments*: "1. The shorter, the better; 2. A bit of ideology and being up to date is most *a propos*; 3. Caricature is just fine, but ignorance of civil service ranks and of the seasons is strictly prohibited" (Letter of April 17, 1883).<sup>561</sup>

Naimy's first sentence can spare no words, it captures the misery that 'Abū Šāhīn will feel for the rest of the piece and the reason for it. Chekhov's other

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<sup>559</sup> 'Abū baṭṭah, p.540.

<sup>560</sup> May (1976), p.74.

<sup>561</sup> Anton Chekhov, Simon Karlinsky, and Michael Henry Heim, *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p.87.

principles are detectable in Naimy's work, too. There is 'a bit of ideology' in the disproportionate economic suffering the family undergoes<sup>562</sup> and we can be sure that this was still the case at the time of publication. Furthermore, although he has no obvious need to know about civil service ranks, Naimy has to be fully cognizant of its equivalent in rural Mount Lebanon in the mid twentieth century: that is, the dynamics of contemporary education, social and home life in rural Mount Lebanon, so that the text would represent a reality that was recognisable and authentic to its readership. We would obviously bracket a knowledge of the seasons under the need for authenticity, one that Pam Morris describes as 'the reader effect': the understanding that realist novels do not try to trick their readers by 'illusion,' but rather seek to give them pleasure from verisimilitude.<sup>563</sup>

As stated before, Naimy included the Gogolian 'laughter through tears' in this short story with the comedic revenge that 'Abū Šāhīn visits upon his profligate son by sending him the diploma filled with goat droppings and hair.<sup>564</sup> Visual comedy was a device that Naimy employed for many of his later short stories that concluded with similar slapstick or absurd situations. Mas'ūd's disastrous attempts to give his wife the present she wants in *Hadīya* (from *Akābir*) are depicted with a cinematic humour that allows the reader to forget the potential gravity of the situation:

His wife insisted on hanging up the mirror that instant. Mas'ūd got a nail and knocked it into the wall – at the spot he had chosen before. He

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<sup>562</sup> This is a factor that we have explored during the course of the second chapter on the political nature of Naimy's writings.

<sup>563</sup> Morris (2003), 'The Reader Effect' pp.119-28.

<sup>564</sup> Quoted in the second chapter (p.153).

hung the mirror on the nail, then called his wife to see if its height was suitable. No sooner had she come up and touched it than the nail broke away and the mirror fell to the floor and shattered completely. His wife was stunned to see her husband, too, fall to the floor and to hear him call for help: 'A doctor...'<sup>565</sup>

Behind the laughter, however, are a number of serious points raised by the story which also follows the principle of laconism in its opening sentences:

That Saturday in July marked a memorable event in the life of Mas'ūd. The building was nearing completion, and the boss urged the masons and labourers not to leave until they had set the last stone in the last wall, even if darkness overtook them. Mas'ūd's job in the building site was transporting the stones to where the masons were working. It was a job at which he excelled, thanks to his robust back, his large chest and shoulders, the strength of his legs and arms, and his agility in climbing ladders and negotiating the boards in the high, narrow, shaky 'scaffolding.'<sup>566</sup>

In the context of the opening paragraph, the humour at the end of the short story sounds even more ironic and bitter. Mas'ūd has a manual job that is physically dangerous and relies heavily upon his fitness. Events in the main content of the short story tell us that Mas'ūd is not paid very well. We can assume from the authoritarian attitude of the boss and the control he has over his workers that general conditions on the building site are poor, and that because he is 'confined to humping the stones,' Mas'ūd is probably not

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<sup>565</sup> *Akābir* (Beirut: Naufal, 2003), p.127.

<sup>566</sup> *Akābir*, p.117.

qualified to get a different job. Bearing in mind the demands of his current job and his limited career prospects, the disaster that meets Mas'ūd and his wife at the end of the story has added pathos.

Aside from the reading of Gogol and Chekhov evident in the story, however, there is another Russian writer who is making his presence felt in the dialogic process: Maksim Gorky. Gorky had been a member of the 'Sreda'<sup>567</sup> literary group, whose members also included Aleksandr Kuprin and Leonid Andreev – all of whom had translations of their stories that appeared in the editions of *al-Funūn*.<sup>568</sup> Highly politically motivated, the 'Sreda' writers<sup>569</sup> fought against the dreadful social conditions of their time by writing of its details in literature; short stories were its preferred genre, but drama, poetry and novels were also employed in the battle against the stifling autocracy of the state.<sup>570</sup> Their style of neo-realism deliberately attempted to not only represent a contemporary reality in Russia external to the prose, but to make the reader feel sympathy, pathos and anger by transferring the point of view of the narrator directly into the mindsets of the characters populating the narratives from the moment the literary text commenced. The *Weltanschauung* in the new 'Sreda' prose literature sought to reflect the viewpoint of the masses themselves by narrating the stories of the people directly affected by large-scale economic and industrial change. Gorky in

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<sup>567</sup> Literally 'The Wednesdays' on account of that being the day when the writers met at the home of their patron, Nikolai Teleshov. See Mary Louise Loe, 'Maksim Gor'kii and the Sreda Circle: 1899-1905' (Slavic Review (Vol.44, No.1, Spring, 1985)).

<sup>568</sup> Maksim Gorky, "al-Mā': wa-ahmīyatuhu fī-ṭ-ṭabi'ah wa-ḥāyāt al-insān," Leonid Andreyev, "al-Ḥaya jamīla li-l-nahīdin min al-mawt," (both in *al-Funūn* 1, No.1 (April, 1913)) Aleksandr Kuprin, "as-Sa'adah," (*al-Funūn* 2, No.6 (November, 1916)).

<sup>569</sup> Also known as the 'Znanie' ('knowledge') writers because of the name of their publishing cooperative. See Loe (op. cit.) and Nicholas Luker (ed. and trans.), *An Anthology of Russian Neo-Realism: the "Znanie" School of Maxim Gorky* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1982).

<sup>570</sup> Loe, op. cit.

particular concentrated on the large swathes of people that had hitherto been abandoned by literature: the masses in the provincial towns, the army, the travellers, agricultural labourers and disenfranchised industrial workers who, in the case of Gorky's novel *Mat' (Mother)*, were imprisoned for voicing political opinions.<sup>571</sup>

We can read the literary precursors of Mas'ūd in Gorky's short stories that express the misery of a poor existence in the outer reaches of Russia. Take, for example, the beginning of Gorky's story *Odnazhdi osen'yu (One Autumn Night)*:

Once in the autumn I happened to be in a very unpleasant and inconvenient position. In the town where I had just arrived and where I knew not a soul, I found myself without a farthing in my pocket and without a night's lodging.

Having sold during the first few days every part of my costume without which it was still possible to go about, I passed from the town into the quarter called "Yste," where were the steamship wharves – a quarter which during the navigation season fermented with boisterous, laborious life, but now was silent and deserted, for we were in the last days of October.<sup>572</sup>

The selling of the protagonist's possessions and the air of desperation puts us in mind of *al-Bankārūliyā*, while the description of a working-class community that is unable to rely upon steady, fixed work for the whole year, and the ephemeral nature of working opportunities, reminds us of *Hadiya*. The

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<sup>571</sup> Maksim Gorky, *Izbrannoe* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1984), pp.5-313: 'Mat'.'

<sup>572</sup> Maksim Gorky, *The Collected Short Stories of Maxim Gorky*, trans. Yarmolinsky, Avrahm and Budberg, Moura (London: Octagon, 1973), p.43.

employment of literature in underlining poor social conditions is something that Lukács referred to in the passage quoted in the introduction of this chapter: that '[t]he subjective honesty of the writer can engender true realism only if it is the literary expression of so extensive a social movement that its problems drive the writer to observe and describe its most important aspects.'<sup>573</sup> This claim, however, that both Naimy and Gorky seek better conditions for their vast, poor, rural communities, is problematised by Morris' observations on the Marxist Frankfurt School, concerning literature's capacity for driving through social change:

A more damaging charge against realism than that of epistemological complacency is Adorno's claim that the representation of acts of suffering and atrocity in popular art contains 'however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it' (Taylor, Ronald (ed. and trans.), *Aesthetics and Politics: Debates Between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno* (London: Verso, 1980), p.189).<sup>574</sup>

Naimy, nevertheless, appears to have made up his own mind on literature's capacity to implement social change and made a conscious effort to embrace *iltizām al-adab*.<sup>575</sup> Along with Arab authors in the postcolonial era whose ideas helped to shape Naimy's literary techniques and approaches, such as Salāma Mūsā and Ra'īf Khūrī, Gorky's texts were central to this insight. In May, 1958, timed perfectly between the first editions of *Akābir* (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1956) and *'Abū baṭṭah* (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1959), Naimy wrote an essay on Maksim

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<sup>573</sup> Lukács, op. cit.

<sup>574</sup> Morris (2003), p.21.

<sup>575</sup> The term was 'coined by the Egyptian author Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889–1973) in his translation of the French word *engagement*' and 'became a central concept in literary discussions during the decades of nation-building in the postcolonial Arab world' (Brill Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three, online).

Gorky that would appear later in the collection of literary essays, *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*.<sup>576</sup> Naimy described Gorky as representing a new breed of writers as he found himself enthroned by the working classes – a polar opposite to the youthful Pushkin who had dedicated his poetry to the throne of the Romanovs.<sup>577</sup> Resurrecting a metaphor he had used to describe Arabic literature in comparison to Russian literature, Naimy stated that Gorky ‘aroused their [the wider Russian reading classes] indignation at the ignorance, *darkness*, despotism and exploitation.’<sup>578</sup> Gorky had achieved this representation of the bleak nature of the country by basing his literary texts to a large degree upon ‘the homeless and the ostracized’ he saw during his travels in Russia.<sup>579</sup>

It was not only Gorky’s short stories, however, that, like some of Naimy’s short stories, achieved the ‘very complex balance between metaphor and metonymy, between the empirical effect and the truth effect, [which] results in a radical testing of universal ‘truths’ against historical particularity in such a way that neither localism nor generalization prevails.’<sup>580</sup> Naimy noticed the especial effectiveness of Gorky’s revolutionary play, *Na dnye (The Lower Depths)*, which he treated to analysis in the later part of the essay.

Emphasising his considerable and thorough knowledge of Russian literature, Naimy quotes the critic Nikolai K. Mikhailovsky (1842-1904) on his experience

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<sup>576</sup> First published in Beirut: Nawfal, 1972. The copy referred to here is, as previously mentioned, the Nawfal fourth edition, 1988.

<sup>577</sup> Naimy, *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, p.81.

<sup>578</sup> Italics mine. Naimy used the trope of darkness a great deal to describe the ignorance of lack of development of a reading public, from *Sab’ūn I*, p.201, where he describes the ‘thick darkness’ in which the Arabs live, to the collection of essays *an-Nūr wa ad-dajūr*, where darkness is used to indicate those who have not stumbled upon the light of theosophy.

<sup>579</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, p.82.

<sup>580</sup> Morris (2003), p.113.

of seeing the play for the first time, 'I arrived at the moment of a dreadful realisation that there were doubts about the establishment which trampled upon people, sent them to labour camps and mutilated their souls.'<sup>581</sup> In his assessment of *Na dnye*, Naimy cites a song chanted in the play with interjections from other characters. Its lyrics evoke the desperation of life and the despondency of the individuals. On a personal note, the song resonated with Naimy because fellow students used to sing the same piece at the Poltava Seminary, and so confirmed to Naimy the power of literature to blur the boundary between art and the external reality it purports to represent.<sup>582</sup>

Naimy's respect for the mode through which Gorky expresses himself goes deeper than this primary, emotional recognition. Naimy frequently employs words in his criticism that suggest that human life in the play has been thrown together (*zajja*), as if they were explosive ingredients in an already unstable keg,<sup>583</sup> or, more commonly in the essay, as if they were animals in a *zarībah* – a pen or a barn for livestock.<sup>584</sup> Replicating such a literary device in his own literary texts was not impossible, but Naimy recognised that there existed fundamental differences between Arab and Russian societies. Still, Naimy's use of criminality, the same theme that prompts much of the interaction in *Na dnye*, is employed in *The Present*. More pertinent, however, is Gorky's utilisation of the 'powerful glimpse'<sup>585</sup> into human life, particularly its *al-aḡwār*,

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<sup>581</sup> *Fī al-ḡirbāl al-jadīd*, p.83.

<sup>582</sup> *Fī al-ḡirbāl al-jadīd*, p.87.

<sup>583</sup> *Fī al-ḡirbāl al-jadīd*, p.84.

<sup>584</sup> *Fī al-ḡirbāl al-jadīd*, p.84 passim.

<sup>585</sup> Used by Kerry McSweeney to describe Chekhov's works in *The Realist Short Story of the Powerful Glimpse: Chekhov to Carver* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2007), but equally applicable to Gorky here.

the lowest echelons, that attempt to reveal the core (*ṣamīm*) of humanity to the reader and the reason why, Naimy believes, we ought to remember his name year upon year.<sup>586</sup>

As we claimed in an earlier part of this chapter, in the format of the literary journal the short story was the most convenient and effective vehicle for social and cultural criticism (something that Gorky also exploited through his editorship of and publication in the Russian literary journal *Zhizn'*), but it was not the only literary genre that could be utilised in such a publication. As the next sub-chapter will show, the literary journal could also be used to serialise the novel.

### **Memoirs from the Underground – Pitted Face and Dostoevsky**

Although looking at Naimy's text *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* (Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul, 1949) means retreating chronologically a few decades back to Naimy's time in New York, from a stylistic point of view it makes sense as *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* signifies the first time that Naimy was working with longer texts and attempting a mode of expression that represents a development in his writing from the genre of the short story.<sup>587</sup>

We have considered already in the spirituality chapter the qualities of theosis of the main protagonist of *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, Pitted Face: his desire

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<sup>586</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, p.92.

<sup>587</sup> I use the word 'development' here to mean a venture out into different literary genres rather than 'progress,' for in the Arab world, as Hafez (1993) explains: 'Unlike its Western counterpart, the short story is both a serious and popular genre in Arabic literature, with a sustained vitality and vigour. [...] *The Kenyon Review's* [...] "International Symposium on the Short Story" [...] demonstrates that while the genre is suffering from marginalization in advanced Western societies, with the exception of Germany, it enjoys popularity and health in developing cultures,' p.13. While its marginalization in the West should be contested (see May, 1994 & 1995), the short story's popularity in the Arab world is undisputed.

for Platonic love so that he might ascend above earthly desires, and the bifurcation of his character that owes a great deal of its construction to the main protagonist of *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov. What I want to discuss in this chapter are the epistemological processes of Pitted Face, how he views reality and interprets the world around him, and how this is directed by Naimy's reading of Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz polpol'ya* (Notes from Underground).

Serialised over four consecutive issues in *al-Funūn*<sup>588</sup>, *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* had a troubled nascence as a work of literature. The parts published in *al-Funūn* constituted the first half of the book,<sup>589</sup> but *al-Funūn* closed only two issues later in August 1918, while Naimy was in France during the First World War. It was not until much later, in 1948, that Naimy completed the work and the first edition was published by Beirut's Dār Ṣādir in 1949:

I had discontinued the *Memoirs* when I joined up to the United States army in 1918, and I had not gone back to finish them until thirty years had elapsed – and then I was in Lebanon!<sup>590</sup>

It was not only the amount of time passing between writing the two halves of *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* that seemed to Naimy an obstacle preventing him from making the novel a coherent whole, but, more significantly, the fact that he was no longer writing in the United States but in Lebanon. *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* was originally conceived and written not only for the readership in the Arab world, but perhaps more pertinently for the *mahjar* community in New York for whom the horrific content of the novel would have more currency and

<sup>588</sup> *Al-Funūn* 3, no.3, October 1917 to *Al-Funūn* 3, no.6, June 1918.

<sup>589</sup> Nadeem Naimy (1967), p.163.

<sup>590</sup> *Sab'ūn* III, p.307.

potency. *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* tapped into the shared experience of a community, thus utilising in the narrative what Jauss would identify as the 'horizon of expectation':

The social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where the literary experience of the reader enters into the horizons of expectation of his lived praxis, reforms his understanding of the world, and thereby also has an effect on his social behaviour.<sup>591</sup>

*Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* provides an ineluctable connection between the text, the lived praxis of the community and the horizons of expectation of that community. The relationship is corrupted, however, by Naimy's depiction of a member of their community whose behaviour seriously transgresses the expected societal norms of that community. By continuing to write the novel thirty years after its initial serialisation, and in a country that was far removed from the United States, Naimy was acknowledging that part of the novel's impact was in its relevance to the *mahjar* community, and that some of its effectiveness as what may be described now as a work in the thriller or horror genre would be diminished. Nevertheless, as a literary text, *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* retains some of its power thirty years later, as well as the problems it initially entailed as a work of prose.

Naimy's style in *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* aims to destabilise the reader from the outset. Naimy achieves this by setting his narrative initially in the parameters of a fairly familiar scene, and then subverts the narrative by introducing an unexpected element:

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<sup>591</sup> Jauss (1982), p.39.

Once, a friend and I took refuge in an Arab restaurant in New York to protect ourselves from the rain. We had never set foot in the place before and found it completely devoid of customers. After having ordered some coffee from the owner, we sat down and proceeded to amuse ourselves while we waited for the skies to hold back and the rain to ease off a little. It was not long before the owner of the restaurant came over with two cups of Arabic coffee, which turned our attention to his staggering left and right like he was drunk, or as if there were shards of broken glass beneath his bare feet. He had barely put the coffee down before he threw himself into the chair next to us and said in a sighing voice, 'What a pity for you, Pitted Face!'<sup>592</sup>

In this opening paragraph, we can see the dialogue with Gogol in the setting of the scene, especially the inclusion of the inclement weather to instil a sense of isolation from the community outside the restaurant. Our sense of familiarity and normality has been shattered by the abnormal behaviour of the restaurant owner, who appears to have something wrong with his legs (again, the manifestation of feelings of horror and fear are presented to the reader through physical attributes which bears testimony to Naimy's reading of early nineteenth century Russian literature) and then our focus is centralised on the character who will be the main focus of the novel: Pitted Face.

It is only after this foundation of the novel's premise that we enter the mindset of a character who owes a great deal of his construction to Dostoevsky, and especially *Notes from Underground*. Naimy introduces the voice of Pitted Face, who cannot physically appear in the novel as he has had

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<sup>592</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, from *al-Majmū'ah al-kāmilah* (Beirut: Dār al-'ilm li-l-mulayn, 1971), p.343. All subsequent quotations from same edition.

to flee New York, to the reader through the literary genre of a diary in a stylistic move that seems to anticipate the ideas of Bakhtin and hybridization in the discourse of the novel:

[Hybridization] is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor.

Such mixing of two languages within the boundaries of a single utterance is, in the novel, an artistic device (or more accurately, a system of devices) that is deliberate.<sup>593</sup>

While the mixing of languages takes place all the time in the discourse of the novel, as Bakhtin explains elsewhere, detailing the subtle appropriation of, for instance, journalistic or formal speech in the works of Dickens that falls into the category of heteroglossia in the novel,<sup>594</sup> the conjoining of genres in *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* is more abrupt, but does not necessarily disqualify it from being a novel. On this question of genre classification, Thomas O. Beebee has made interesting observations on the essential fluidity of genre that assist us in categorising Naimy's work:

Faced with the question of just how an authentic legal text, when reproduced verbatim in Pushkin's novel *Dubrovsky*, can lose its legal character and gain a literary one, Jurji Lotman is forced to conclude: "A change in the function of a text gives it a new semantics and new syntax. Thus, in the example [of Pushkin's novel], the construction of a

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<sup>593</sup> Bakhtin (1981), p.358.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.301-8.

document according to the formal laws of a legal text is perceived as construction according to the laws of artistic composition ... The social function of a text determines its typological classification."<sup>595</sup>

The diary, in the case of *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, is given new semantics and new syntax, plus a new relationship with the reader whose lived praxis and horizons of expectation may lead them to expect that Pitted Face's experiences both complement and conflict with their own. From the moment the diary commences, however, it becomes clear to the reader that the author is psychologically far removed from them:

Monday

There are two kinds of people in the world: those who talk and those who stay quiet. I am part of the silent humanity; the rest are all talkers. Now, to a degree the dumb and babies have their mouths made inaccessible by eternal wisdom and so do not talk. At times, I make my mouth inaccessible by my hand. By doing so I have attained the grace of silence, while the talkers have not acquired the bitterness of speech. For that reason, I stay silent while others talk.<sup>596</sup>

The constant egotistical tone of the author, together with an inability and unwillingness to share the societal norms of his community (his choice to render himself completely silent would seem like an irrational decision), remind us of the opening lines of *Notes from Underground*, in which the reader is similarly put ill at ease by the unconventional, self-absorbed nature of the narrator:

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<sup>595</sup> Thomas O. Beebee, *The Ideology of Genre: a comparative study of generic instability* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p.13.

<sup>596</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.349.

I am a sick man ... I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man. I think there is something wrong with my liver. But I don't understand the least thing about my illness, and I don't know for certain what part of me is affected. I am not having any treatment for it, and never have had, although I have a great respect for medicine and doctors. I am besides extremely superstitious, if only in having such respect for medicine. (I am well educated enough not to be superstitious, but superstitious I am.) No, I refuse treatment out of spite.<sup>597</sup>

In both texts, we are asked as readers to accept their idiosyncrasies and show patience as they explain to us through the texts the reasoning behind their decisions. On the surface, both works present unorthodox people who are writing in order to explain to their readers in a kind of logical, philosophical treatise the reasons why they are acting the way they do, but underneath the surface text they are presenting views of the world, representations of the external reality about them, that will both resonate and conflict with their readers' world-views, creating the tension that exists in a novel that seeks to horrify or excite. Pitted Face has already shown himself to be, in the introduction to the novel that takes place in the restaurant, a man who is remarkable on account of his eccentricity and abnormality in the community:

He [Pitted Face] came to me on a day just like this one. He was half-naked, with nothing to cover his head, and the rain was pouring down from every angle over his body.<sup>598</sup>

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<sup>597</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground / The Double*, trans. Jessie Coulson (London: Penguin, 1972), p.15.

<sup>598</sup> *Muḏakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.344.

However, it is up to the memoirs to provide the character information about Pitted Face and help to formulate a world-view, but this world-view is built up by a person who rages against all the conventions that society demands of him, while entwining his perception of reality in the smallest details of his environment. We have to draw upon his description of the minutiae of his life in order to gauge the personality of Pitted Face:

Saturday

I am a well-known man. I have a face like a piece of wood into which the worm has burrowed holes. You can see it in the eyes of the people, and that is all the people know about me. Why are they not satisfied with that? They even call out to me, 'Hey, Pitted Face, bring us five coffee, or bring us three whiskies, Pitted Face, or get us the poker cards, Pitted Face,' and I get them the coffee and the whisky and the poker cards. So why is it that they cannot stop themselves from asking me about my name, the names of my father and mother, my country of birth, and my age and so on? Even if they knew my name was Yaqub, Zukriya or Yusuf, would I be transformed in their eyes and no longer be an anonymous person and would my face no longer be a piece a wood into which the worm has burrowed holes?<sup>599</sup>

The phrase 'my country of birth' betrays to some extent the circumstances in which Naimy wrote this passage from the first half of *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*. We have in mind as readers a world-view of the émigré community of New York in around 1916, where there are constantly new arrivals and departures, and into which people from many countries in the Arab world will strive to

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<sup>599</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.351.

communicate with their fellow community members, but in which Pitted Face does not want to play an active part. We can compare Pitted Face, then, with the main protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. *Notes from Underground* revolves around the idea of the main protagonist narrator that in order to rally against determinism and promote his free will he must take pleasure in all of society's ills and enjoy the humiliation, rejection and pain he suffers in St Petersburg, paying no concern to the social expectations of his community.<sup>600</sup> The Underground man's refusal to get medical treatment for his liver complaint 'out of spite' is one such instance of this anti-deterministic free will, similar in essence to Pitted Face refusing to engage in social niceties, but Dostoevsky shows us other perversions:

'Ha, ha, ha! After that, you will be looking for pleasure even in toothache!' you will exclaim, laughing.

'Why not? There is pleasure even in toothache,' I shall reply. I once had toothache for a whole month, so I know what I'm talking about. People don't suffer *that* in silence, of course, they groan; but the groans aren't straightforward and honest, they are spiteful and spite is the whole point of them.<sup>601</sup>

Both works can be read as oblique acts of social criticism:<sup>602</sup> Dostoevsky's Underground man and Naimy's Pitted Face look upon the basic aspects of reality as something to be logically broken down into the fundamental

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<sup>600</sup> Although, as James P. Scanlan notes in 'The Case against Rational Egoism in Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground"' (Journal of the History of Ideas (Vol.60, No.3, Jul., 1999)), the Underground Man's stance vis-à-vis determinism and Rational Egoism is one of self-contradiction and confusion.

<sup>601</sup> *Notes from Underground*, p.24.

<sup>602</sup> See, for example, Alina Wyman's article 'The Specter of Freedom: "Ressentiment" and Dostoevski's "Notes from Underground"' (*Studies in East European Thought*, Vol. 59, No. 1/2, Dostoevskij's Significance for Philosophy and Theology (Jun., 2007), pp. 119-140).

elements of experience and praxis, and then put back together in such a way as it contradicts the shared experiences of their communities. It is, as mentioned above, a process of introducing the unexpected to the familiar that triggers feelings of horror and revulsion in the reader. For instance, the Underground Man strives to assert himself even through utter humiliation on account of the fact that other people ignore him. Pitted Face arrives at similar, seemingly perverse conclusions through comparable processes of reasoning:

“They have eyes who do not see. They have ears who do not hear.”

What do these people see or hear? They pass all around me in their hundreds but their eyes are never raised from the ground, and their ears don't hear anything but the drone of their own voices and the chatter of their tongues which never become tired or bored of talking about their bodily needs, earthly desires and base expectations.

I heard one of them say, ‘How nice it is this evening!’ and he meant that it was warm. People measure nature in scales of warmth. I heard another one say, ‘Aren't the stars beautiful?’ but he was looking between his feet.<sup>603</sup>

Naimy has created a character who seems to have heard all the of the clichéd expressions that form the background noise of a community's chatter and not only interpreted them literally, but reacted to them as if he has never heard anyone say anything like them before. Furthermore, Pitted Face has taken the accepted values of his community and asked, like the Underground man, why they should accept them. People equate warmth with ‘niceness,’ but is there any logical reason why they ought to, asks Pitted Face. Pitted

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<sup>603</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.356.

Face questions our assumptions about external reality for, as we remember from the introduction, he had turned up half-naked to the restaurant in the pouring rain, and so the weather does not conform to the same scales of niceness as it does for the rest of the community. Finally, both Pitted Face and the Underground man are aware that the general public disregards them and so they look for ways to assert themselves in the community.

The shared representation of reality in *Notes from Underground* and *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, in both of which the main protagonists appear to be confronting that reality utterly afresh as if for the first time, extends beyond observations of anonymous people and into the social dynamics of the institutions around them. We witness two characters who seem to be eager to question, and possibly destroy, all the social systems around them, either to practise free will (in the case of the Underground man) or to attain theosis and rid themselves of earthly considerations (in the case of Pitted Face). The Underground man attempts to do this through targeted derision, ridiculing the conventions and pretensions of people in a higher economic and social class to him. In this passage, in which the Underground man, out of spite and a masochistic urge, wilfully offends his hosts who boast about their well-connected acquaintances, Dostoevsky mocks the social-climbing aspirations of certain people in urban Russia:

‘This Kolya, who owns three thousand souls, isn’t here to say good-bye to you, though,’ I said suddenly, breaking into the conversation. For a moment nobody said anything.

‘You’re drunk already,’ Trudolyubov condescended to remark at last, with a contemptuous glance in my direction. Zverkov was silently

staring at me as if I was some crawling insect. I looked down. Simonov hastily began pouring out champagne.<sup>604</sup>

Although Pitted Face lacks the masochism, he shares the experience of being on the outside of expected societal norms and thus interprets reality in a similar way, daring to wonder why people attach such importance and sentimentality to universally held concepts:

People call the place where they were born 'a homeland.' This word is sacred in their minds. They shed many tears at leaving their homelands and waste away longing for it. Why? Because they are used to it. The homeland is nothing more than a custom, and people are slaves to their customs. And because they are slaves to their customs, they feel fit to break the earth up into small pieces that they call their homelands. 'That's my homeland and that's your homeland. Stick to the borders of your homeland and don't consider the borders of my homeland. You made your receptacle with the edge of a sword.'<sup>605</sup>

The difference between Dostoevsky and Naimy, despite the analogous stances towards an external reality that in their minds needs to be reconsidered and re-shaped, is that Dostoevsky's narrative has other characters to emphasise the alarming nature of the Underground man's iconoclastic views. As Naimy has chosen a diary in which to propound comparable assertions, we are not given the same level of discord between characters. For his next novel, Naimy introduced more characters, and more

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<sup>604</sup> *Notes from Underground*, p.76.

<sup>605</sup> *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš*, p.361. The pun Naimy uses here is a common trope from classical Arabic poetry and does not work in English: *ḥadd* means both a border of a country, and the edge of a sword.

interaction between those characters, into the narrative and turned to romanticism to express himself.

### **The Shadow of Jibrān in Naimy's Literary Expressions**

When Naimy published *Liḳā'* (An Encounter, 1946), it was his first attempt at creative prose fiction since he wrote *Sā'at al-kūkū* in 1925. Naimy's biography of Jibrān seemed to draw a bold line underneath his personally unfulfilling but literally productive period in the United States, which came to an end in 1932.<sup>606</sup> At that point it seemed as if Naimy's fascination with Jibrān had come to a conclusion, but *Liḳā'* proved the opposite.

Before discussing the work and its *engagement* with reality, and where it coincides with Naimy's reading of Russian literature, we ought to delineate the literary landscape into which Naimy was projecting himself. Fundamentally, Arabic literature had moved on from the nineteen twenties and Naimy no longer found himself at the forefront of modern literary movements. Naimy's short stories from *Kān ma kān* had provided a breakthrough in modern Arabic prose writing that would prepare Arabic reading audiences for the more mature and sophisticated works of Lashin, Haqqi and others.<sup>607</sup> Reading habits were changing, however, and in his essay on the modern Arabic short story, Hafez notes a particular sentiment in literature that matched the mood of its audience:

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<sup>606</sup> See politics chapter for more on Naimy's personal views of New York, views that are counterbalanced by the fact that he wrote both *Kān ma kān* and *al-Ġirbāl* while in the United States.

<sup>607</sup> See Hafez (1993), chapters 6 and 7.

The gloom of the 1930s and its failure to provide favourable conditions for the achievement of national aspirations was a suitable atmosphere of the development of some of the romantic themes.<sup>608</sup>

By the 1940s, the literary atmosphere had turned sombre once more, largely as a result of the spectre of the Second World War, a failed nationalist uprising in Iraq, and the population boom and growth in urbanisation all over the Arab world.<sup>609</sup> In these turbulent times, the public wanted a literature to reflect the tension:

Hopes of independence were dashed by the war and there arose a wave of popular anger. An atmosphere similar to that of the early 1920s, in which the maturation of the Arabic short story was accomplished, prevailed and was conducive to the development of the realistic trend. [...] The compelling tableaux of the life, sufferings and tribulations of the underdogs provided many Egyptian writers of the younger generation, at the time, with a strong sense of purpose and a literary direction to express their social and political anger.<sup>610</sup>

Although a novel rather than a short story, Naimy's *Liqā'* feels out of time with the context in which it was written – it is romantic, rather than what Hafez describes as realist, or perhaps *al-adab al-hādif* ('literature with a purpose')<sup>611</sup> – but this should perhaps not surprise us. Naimy had deliberately taken himself

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<sup>608</sup> Sabry Hafez, 'The Modern Arabic Short Story,' from M. M. Badawi (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p.292.

<sup>609</sup> Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), pp.373-88.

<sup>610</sup> Hafez (op.cit., 1992), p.308. Hafez concentrates in this sub-chapter on Egyptian writers, but the conditions he describes could equally be applied to most Arab writers in the 1940s.

<sup>611</sup> Roger Allen, *The Arabic Literary Heritage* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p.403. Allen describes the era of the late 1940s and 1950s as being 'gathered around the concept of commitment (*iltizām*),' which is ineluctably linked to *al-adab al-hādif*.

out of the maelstrom of New York and hidden himself away in Mount Lebanon, removed from the turbulence of a modernist, capitalist society. *Liqā'* reflects this mood of the writer by focusing on what he believes are timeless aspects of human experience.

Concerning the parameters of the plot, *Liqā'* is a love story with a strong element of the fantastic genre, as described by Todorov.<sup>612</sup> Most of the narrative takes place after a musician, Leonardo, has played the tune “*Liqā'*” to an innkeeper’s daughter, Bahā’, on the eve of her marriage and sent her into a trance. Eager but unable to wake her from her comatose state, several characters embark on an unsuccessful search for Leonardo, but it is the narrator who finally finds the man, playing his violin in a grotto in the desolate ‘Virgins’ Valley,’ where he has come for quiet contemplation. The events described, where music has rendered Bahā’ utterly insensible and any hopes of waking her impossible, await an explanation from the narrator that will either pitch the phenomenon in the natural world (Bahā’ may have entered into a coma, for instance) or locate the incident in the field of the supernatural. It is in this liminal space, the hesitation that exists before explanation, that the fantastic resides.

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.<sup>613</sup>

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<sup>612</sup> Tsvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

<sup>613</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

Naimy, however, leaves the fantastic by resorting to theosophic concepts to explain events, yet seems to accept some existence of the supernatural – what Todorov called the ‘fantastic-marvellous.’<sup>614</sup> The narrator, who has found Leonardo in a grotto in the Virgins’ Valley learns among, other things, that Leonardo and Bahā’ had loved each other in a previous life, when Bahā’ was a prince’s daughter and Leonardo was a shepherd. Leonardo had played for her then, but because their love was polluted by earthly and bestial desires, they had not attained a celestial existence and had come back to earth in order to learn cosmic unity and purity. Towards the end of the novel, Naimy has Leonardo play to Bahā’ again, at first awakening her and breaking the trance. But the music then sends both Leonardo and Bahā’ into a kind of world beyond the earth as they become at one with each other in a universal cosmic system:

On the green hill, in the shadow of the single, old stone-pine, lay a stately slab of rare marble, upon which was inscribed in large, prominent letters the word, ‘encounter,’ and underneath it in smaller letters: ‘Leondardo – Bahā’.’

On the ground, amongst the roots of the stone-pine, is a bottle made from the same marble which holds the ashes of the violin whose magic only Leonardo could divulge.<sup>615</sup>

Naimy thus hints at an explanation, before leaving the novel in the supernatural with its very final words. Logical, terrestrial explanations were always going to be difficult, however, for Naimy in this novel, as the reader

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<sup>614</sup> Ibid., pp.51-2.

<sup>615</sup> *Liqā’* (Beirut: Nawfal, 1999), p.101.

with a knowledge of Naimy's life will see the clear allusions in the character of Leonardo both to *Ḳalīl Jibrān* and to Naimy's own existence.<sup>616</sup> The novel is essentially a treatise on the allure of Jibrān and the beauty and enchantment of his art, further to the treatise Naimy had already written in the form of a biography, only this novel would be interspersed with references to Naimy's own current life in Mount Lebanon. *Liḳā'* became a romantic view of the reality around him in Baskinta, filtered through the prism of his memory of Jibrān and his intellectual attempts to define more exactly the magic of Jibrān's literature.<sup>617</sup>

Nevertheless, before we reach the supernatural ending, Naimy's prose takes us through territory that has already become familiar through his other works. Recurrent tropes reveal themselves during the narrative, such as Naimy's use of the word *baṣīrah* to denote insight or understanding of God,<sup>618</sup> and his ubiquitous use of the phrase 'light and darkness' to connote aspects of knowledge and ignorance respectively,<sup>619</sup> that show a continuity in Naimy's literary processes, but also his consistent reading of Russian literature. Naimy's description of the conversations that take place between Bahā' and Leonardo on the seriousness and definability of art remind us of the similar investigations Tolstoy undertook in *What is Art?*:

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<sup>616</sup> Naimy frequently referred to Jibrān as Leonardo in his biography of the artist and writer, *Jibrān Ḳalīl Jibrān* (Beirut: Maktabah Sabirt, 1943).

<sup>617</sup> Nadeem Naimy, op. cit., p.268: 'It can be safely concluded, therefore, that Naimy's interest in Jibrān, the man as a literary subject, is a continuation or, more precisely, a propagation of his previous interest in Pitted Face, the fictional character, which later manifests itself again in Leonardo and Mirdād.' While Pitted Face and Mirdād, I believe, are more complex and owe more to Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, the connection between Jibrān and Leonardo seems manifest.

<sup>618</sup> *Liḳā'*, p.18 passim. This was also employed heavily in *al-Bayādir*.

<sup>619</sup> *Liḳā'*, p.21 passim. In the case of p.21, the words *ḍiyā'* (light) and *ḏalām* (darkness) are used, but Naimy uses various permutations in his works.

I was a witness to Bahā's marvels. I became on friendly terms with her and she never addressed me as anything other than, 'My dear friend.' It was disagreeable for her to talk to me about anything other than poetry, music and matters that we called, 'behind nature.'<sup>620</sup>

As with Tolstoy, the spiritual and artistic is inseparable in intellectual matters. We have already observed this inseparability of spirituality and artistic integrity in Tolstoy's *What is Art?*, especially in the example of Tolstoy's evaluation of the peasant women singing.<sup>621</sup> Furthermore, there is a continuous theme throughout the novel of the Rousseauistic contrast between the rural and the urban, which categorises, as per Tolstoyan tropes, the rural as a pastoral idyll to which humanity ought to aspire (as Tolstoy preached both through *War and Peace* and other works, and through his own lived praxis as he established his rural haven at Yasnaya Polyana), and the urban as a place of sadness and ignorance:

The distance that separated us from the city was around seventy miles down the road that was full of winds and turns: now at the bottom of a valley, now at the top of a hill. The earth itself was in bloom with the first flush of green, the air sweet with fragrance, and the birds mad with love, song and romantic happiness, for their wings did not tire and their throats did not become hoarse.<sup>622</sup>

This kind of depiction of the rural Arab world as a prelapsarian Garden of Eden that conflicts with the mood of the narrative set in the urban areas the reader may compare to the beginnings of the early short stories (*Sannatuha*

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<sup>620</sup> *Liqā'*, p.19.

<sup>621</sup> Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, pp.115-6.

<sup>622</sup> *Liqā'*, p.21.

*al-jadīdah* and *al-Āqir* described above), but we should remain aware that Naimy has altered his mode of expression once more. While his early short stories, written in New York, were steeped in nostalgia for the Arab world he had left behind, we saw that his later short stories reflected more accurately the social environment, with all its economic problems, that he saw around him. *Liḳā'*, however, is different to both the short stories and to the far more abstract and metaphysical location of the novel, *Mirdād*, as, although it attends to the same kind of spiritual dialectics that typify *Mirdād*, *Liḳā'* is located in a fictional environment that reflects the contemporary, Arab reality around Naimy at the time of writing:

I didn't answer him, but another man told me that he was the public prosecutor and that he had been hoping for the hand of Bahā' before her proposal. He agreed with the response and said:

'We're not in the Middle Ages, thank God. Rather, we are in the twentieth century – the century of light and civilisation. Present law does not give the slightest weight to magic, and does not provide for the punishment of magic.'<sup>623</sup>

*Liḳā'* reflects something of a tension for Naimy as he tries to write a text that responds to the current situation in the Arab world, yet articulates his profound disquiet at the course that humanity was taking. The words that are put into the character's mouth above, on the subject of the twentieth century being the century of light and civilisation, are deeply ironic, as Naimy recounted in a letter to the Russian Arabist, Krachkovsky, the sense of culture shock he felt at returning to Baskinta in 1932 and seeing cars and electric

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<sup>623</sup> *Liḳā'*, p.34.

lighting there for the first time.<sup>624</sup> Naimy did not welcome what others called civilisation and the rest of the book questions what can truly be called magic if individuals were to reach their potential of theosis:

[Said by Leonardo:] 'I thought that you were above other people. Do you know which of us is the sorcerer and which of us the enchanted? There is only one real sorcerer, my friend, and that is life itself. All people are enchanted and I am amongst their number, only I am enchanted by one of the people who is not enchanted themselves.'<sup>625</sup>

Faced with a choice between expressing a representation of reality in the novel and plunging into more esoteric ruminations on theosis, Naimy opts for the latter, but hesitation before using his spiritual views to explain events is longer than it is in *Mirdād*, which explores spirituality from the very beginning.

### **Naimy's Change of Literary Expression in the Sixties**

*Al-Yaum al-aḳīr* (The Last Day, 1963)<sup>626</sup> tells the story of Dr Mūsā al-'Askarī, a doctor of philosophy, who hears a voice telling him at the start of the novel that the next twenty four hours will be his final day on earth. The next twenty four hours prove to be eventful as Dr Mūsā's mute, paralysed son suddenly and miraculously starts to talk and walk, while this good fortune is mirrored by the sad death of the village mayor's only son. Elsewhere, Dr Mūsā's gardener finds a hoard of golden coins in his garden and they both try to give the treasure to each other, they help a man accidentally wounded by a rifle, then

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<sup>624</sup> RAN archive, St Petersburg, Ph.1026.

<sup>625</sup> *Liḳā'*, p.65.

<sup>626</sup> First published Beirut, Dār Ṣādir, 1963. All references here are to the Nawfal ninth edition of 2001.

are accused by the police of attempted manslaughter, Dr Mūsā's son disappears with a man called 'The Unnamed,' and his wife, who had left him to elope to Switzerland, announces to him her return to Lebanon. Her plane crashes on landing, but a cable to Dr Mūsā informs him that she had missed the flight anyway.

*Al-Yaum al-aḳīr* is an episodic novel that necessarily reminds us of the picaresque *maqāmah* genre that was revived by Muḥammad al-Muwaylīhī.<sup>627</sup> Its arrival on the Arabic literary scene seemed to be, like *Liqā'* before it, somewhat out of sync with the contemporary stylistic climes. After the period of the fifties, when Arabic prose literature had been characterised by *iltizām*, Arabic novels had moved into more symbolic territory where stories that expressed myriad nuances of human society acted as allegories for the political situations in the writers' home countries. Symptomatic of this trend were novels such as *Awlād ḥāratinā* (Children of the Alley, 1959) by Naguib Mahfouz, an allegorical tale questioning the pervasive influence of organised religion in Egyptian society, and *Rijāl fi-š-šams* (Men in the Sun, 1963), in which Ḡassān Kanafānī evoked the tragedy of the Palestinian people through the plight of three refugees. Arabic novels after the Second World War reflected the 'growing resentment aimed not only at the colonial powers but also at many of the *anciens régimes* with their entrenched and often corrupt power structures.'<sup>628</sup> They also, naturally, served as reactions to momentous events in the Arab consciousness: specifically, the creation of Israel in 1948, Egypt's declaration of independence in 1952 and the Suez Crisis of 1956.

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<sup>627</sup> See Roger Allen, *A Period of Time* (Reading: Ithaca, 1992).

<sup>628</sup> Roger Allen, 'The Mature Arabic Novel Outside Egypt,' from M. M. Badawi (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Modern Arabic Literature*.

Against this trend, Naimy published a novel that once again aimed to explain the supreme ideal of theosis in a world in which earthly events should be of no consequence. The point of the many sub-plots in the work, described above, is to show how irrelevant they become to Dr Mūsā once he has accepted that his final day on earth is complete and he is ready to commence a new life. Once, Naimy explains through the text, Dr Mūsā has achieved theosis, good and bad fortune are of no concern, for he is now at one with the cosmic system.

The narrative, like *Liqā'*, can be described as fantastic-marvellous, albeit not in the same way as *Liqā'* functions. We enter into the liminal area of the narrative from the first chapter when we first hear the voice and await the explanation as to what it is: is it a ghost, a prophet, or a sign of schizophrenia? Dr Mūsā concretises the hesitation by accepting at face value the voice's proclamation that he has only a day to live:

I could barely believe it. An hour had gone by since the voice had woken me. A whole hour – all sixty minutes of it. And here I was still sitting in my bed, my head about to overflow with the pictures, shapes, voices, stories and thoughts that crowded it.

If the voice was to be believed – and it was believable – then I had only twenty three hours of my life left.<sup>629</sup>

The novel gives a credible representation of the psychological processes a character like Dr Mūsā, a rational and intellectual character, might undergo if confronted with such a dilemma that he believes to be genuine. The representation is continued through Dr Mūsā's interchanges with his

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<sup>629</sup> *Al-Yaum al-aḵīr*, p.16.

housekeeper, Umm Zaydan, whose characterisation reminds us of many character types from Russian literature, including the holy fool that featured in so many nineteenth century works,<sup>630</sup> and the agitator of Dostoevsky's works who is prone to asking straight-forward and often difficult questions.<sup>631</sup> Her entrance into the narrative is indicative of her character:

[Umm Zaydan:] 'What's the matter, my son? What's the matter?

You've troubled my mind so much, so much.'

[Dr Mūsā:] 'Nothing troubles the mind.'

'And why have you stayed up all night until this hour? Half the night has already gone. I know that from the crow of the cockerel.'

'How do you know that I have not slept?'

'From my window I could see the light on in your window. Are you in any pain at all, love? Shall I bring you a cup of coffee, or tea, or some hot water to wash your feet in?'<sup>632</sup>

Umm Zaydan is neither a buffoon nor a prying gossip, but a character who to some degree feigns naivety in order for Dr Mūsā to say what is troubling his conscience, and therefore set in motion a process of moral reflection.<sup>633</sup> It is not Umm Zaydan's role to question Dr Mūsā's ethics or sanity personally, but to prompt him to scrutinise his own mind; Umm Zaydan therefore fulfils a role

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<sup>630</sup> Including Tolstoy's *Childhood*, which features a depiction of a holy fool called Grisha, who inspires terror and awe in equal measures. See Ewa M. Thompson, 'The Archetype of the Fool in Russian Literature,' *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (Autumn, 1973), pp. 245-273, and Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia: the holy fool in Russian culture* (London: University Press of America, 1987).

<sup>631</sup> Pyotr Stepanovich Verkhovensky in *Devils* is a good example of this, for his idiocy is a catalyst for events, but he is also wiser than his fellow characters realise.

<sup>632</sup> *Al-Yaum al-aḳīr*, p.24.

<sup>633</sup> See Thompson (1973), in which she mentions that the holy fool would often feign madness in order to promote moral reflection in others (pp.245-6).

similar to that of the holy fool in Russian literature: the character who is able to speak his mind to all strata of society, up to the tsar, with impunity.<sup>634</sup>

Evidence of Naimy's continued interest in both his Russian reading and the modern Soviet Union can be read in the following quotation:

They talked about the weather, the seasons, the prices; about the corruption of power and of the powerful; about the Congo, Algeria and Laos; *about socialism and capitalism, nuclear weapons, artificial satellites, and spaceships.*<sup>635</sup>

The narrative at this point is located solidly in the real world and seems to point to Naimy's work, *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšintun*.<sup>636</sup> The rest of the novel seeks to present a representation of a recognisable reality for his particular Arab character, even if, on account of his wealth and occupation, it is not a reality that is typical for the readership in the same way that *Awlād ḥāratinā* or *Rijāl fi-š-šams* would have resonated with their particular readerships. Like *Liqā'*, Naimy's employment of theosis to explain the presence of the mysterious voice interrupts this representation of reality and asks the reader directly to believe in the spiritual principles that Naimy shares.

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<sup>634</sup> An interesting parallel can be seen with the holy fool in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (see Thompson, 1973, p.250). Significantly, Naimy wrote a short essay on Pushkin, included in *Fi-l-ḡirbāl al-jadīd*, at around the same time as *al-Yaum al-aḳīr*, indicating from where the seeds for the character of Umm Zaydan may have originated.

<sup>635</sup> *Al-Yaum al-aḳīr*, p.102. Italics mine.

<sup>636</sup> Discussed in the next chapter. Incidentally, another of Naimy's works, *Sanatuha al-jadīdah*, is strongly alluded to in the eleventh chapter, which is largely taken up with the story of a rich man in a village, whose wife becomes pregnant for the eighth time after giving birth to seven daughters. She bears a son, but the man dies before he can hold him.

## Conclusion

In some ways, *Al-Yaum al-aḳīr* stands out from Naimy's corpus of fiction because of the evident middle class circumstances of the main protagonist, Dr Mūsā al-'Askarī. Many of Naimy's short stories are either nostalgic portraits of a rural Arab world of the past, pictures of poverty-ravaged contemporary social life in Lebanon, or 'travelling' morality tales of the '*Ulba kibrīt* (A Box of Matches)<sup>637</sup> style, where the narrator tells a story designed to question the readers principles of meanness and goodness, and spiritual, as opposed to material, values. In '*Ulba kibrīt*, the narrator recalls how a hotel owner, whom he considered to be a good friend, chased after him to recover the cost of a box of matches the narrator had mistakenly taken. This kind of morality tale of Naimy, where people are kind and obliging for ulterior motives, finds a parallel manifestation in Baydas' *an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah*, where a short story, *Min ḥāya Tolstoy* (From the Life of Tolstoy),<sup>638</sup> makes an explicit statement on the social construct of class. It records how, when mistaken for a peasant, Tolstoy was about to be thrown off a train for not having a ticket. When the guard realised he was talking to Tolstoy, he quickly turned from malicious authoritarianism to obsequious charm, enraging Tolstoy all the more with his falsity.

Naimy's novels, as we have seen, tended to be more oblique in their references to reality. While *Muḍakkirāt al-'arqaš* is clearly intended to represent an identifiable external reality, that of the *mahjar* community of New York in around 1916, the central protagonist comes across as someone very

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<sup>637</sup> From the collection *Akābir*.

<sup>638</sup> *An-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah*, (9/III, 1911).

much removed from reality and societal norms; Pitted Face, as described above, has more in common with other outcasts from society in Russian literature, such as the Underground man and Raskolnikov. *Liqā'*, *Ya ibn ādam!*<sup>639</sup> and *Mirdād* all take place to varying degrees in literary landscapes that are not specifically designed to reflect contemporary social reality, but rather represent the author's intention to put across his spiritual ideas to his uninformed readership. *Liqā'* comes close to depicting accurately an image of contemporary reality in the Arab world, but moves almost completely into the area of abstract theosophical notions long before the end of the novel. *Mirdād*, on the other hand, represents a very local reality in its second chapter, 'The Flint Slope,'<sup>640</sup> before moving into a quasi-biblical narrative for the *Book of Mirdād* section that occupies the main bulk of the novel. Only *Al-Yaum al-aḵīr* moves as a novel into the sphere of depicting contemporary reality around the author in fiction, and adopts a protagonist who evidently reflects Naimy's situation: middle-class, educated, intellectual and deeply contemplative, especially of spiritual matters.

Recalling Auerbach's quotation at the start of this chapter of how there was no possibility of Russian literature excluding "low" subjects from a classical genre, we should also posit the notion that there were no classes at all that found themselves squeezed out from nineteenth-century literature. Ranging from Gogol's peasants to Dostoevsky's treatment of an urban underclass living next to its burgeoning middle class, through to the aristocratic figures

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<sup>639</sup> First published in Beirut by Dār Ṣādir in 1969. Time prevents us from discussing what is a literary text in dialectical form between two voices, but its content is not wholly relevant to the argument.

<sup>640</sup> There is pictorial evidence for this in *Sab'ūn* III. Two pictures of Naimy on the summit of Mount Sannine (p.217) and High Rock (p.223) suggest that the Flint Slope could be based on either of these peaks, or an amalgam of them and other mountains in the area.

that feature prominently in Tolstoy's works, Russian literature was marked by its inclusivity of subjects treated to the social and critical realism. Naimy, too, was as inclusive as he could be in his representations of reality in the Arab world, even though his balance of moral values could be rather skewed in his characterisation of wealthier, titled people (consider the depictions of the main characters in *Sa'ādat "al-bēg"* and *Sanatuha al-jadīdah*), as opposed to the wholesome, benevolent characterisation of those afflicted by poverty (the characters of *Hadīya* and *Akābir* are two supporting examples).<sup>641</sup>

These are aspects, however, that concern Naimy's mode of expression in depicting the Arab world of the twentieth century, both locally and generally, in various social strata. We also intended to investigate the genres Naimy used as modes of expression for his prose and how these interacted with his reading of Russian literature. From what we have seen, we can say with some confidence that the creation and development of a literary journal in New York in the early nineteenth century – *al-Funūn* itself being a mode of expression that was based on a similar Russian creation – was not only paramount to Naimy's development as a writer, but also probably represented the apogee in his creative prose literary works. *Al-Funūn* formed a part of the sphere of Arab readings of Russian literature in the early twentieth century, a sphere that not only included *an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* but also the Egyptian literary group *Jamā'at al-madrasat al-ḥadīṭa*,<sup>642</sup> which was formed around 1917, and Naimy responded to the interest by producing creative works that were formed by his own reading of Russian literature, created for a format, the literary journal,

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<sup>641</sup> More of the reasons behind this decision have been looked at in the politics chapter.

<sup>642</sup> For more on this group and their readings of Russian literature, see Hafez (1993), esp. pp.216-9.

made in the Russian style, and addressed the same themes that he had encountered both in his readings of Russian literature and during his time in the country. One possible reason that Naimy's later creative works (save for the two later collections of short stories, *Akābir* and *'Abū baṭṭah*, which harked back to the era of *al-Funūn*) failed to bear the same intensity of the stories of *Kān ma kān* is that Naimy lived in relative isolation and thus lacked the supportive literary network that nurtured his earlier short stories. Without that, Naimy, as he approached old age and became more insular in his outlook, veered increasingly more to a mode of expression that attempted to explain his belief in theosis.

## Chapter Four

### **A Sieve for Fireflies – Naimy’s Interaction with the Literary Criticism of Belinsky**

#### **Introduction**

Mikhail Naimy’s education reached a dramatic crescendo while in Poltava, albeit not of the type that the hitherto diligent student may at one time have expected. Secluded in the sick bay with incapacitating eye disease for a large portion of his time there, entangled in a complicated love affair with a married woman, conscious of the social conditions outside the Orthodox Church’s mandate and finally caught up in the radical, political activism that sought to overturn the fundamental tenets of the seminary, Naimy’s educational career in Little Russia came to an ignominious end as far as his grade reports were concerned. However, his experience in Poltava in terms of the books he read would become an axle upon which the rest of his literary career would hinge.<sup>643</sup>

Naimy believed that in order to become a writer it was necessary not only to understand the craft of writing from the author’s point of view, but also to formulate a systematic knowledge of the dynamics of what makes good literature. To set Naimy off on this journey and be a continuous source for dialogue was the work of one of Russia’s most important nineteenth century critics: Vissarion Grigoryevich Belinsky. We know from *Ab’ad min mūsūkū wa min wāšintun* that Naimy came to hold an especially high regard and

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<sup>643</sup> Naimy thus (presumably unwittingly) emulated the actions of his literary hero, Lev Tolstoy, who also failed to complete his studies. Tolstoy left the University of Kazan without a degree in 1847 (see Edward Baker Greenwood, *Tolstoy: The Comprehensive Vision* (London: Methuen, 1980), p.38).

emotional fascination for Belinsky's work from the time that he came across his works in Poltava.<sup>644</sup> What this chapter shall try and address is Naimy's response to a wider tradition of modern Russian literary criticism of which Belinsky was such an enthusiastic pioneer; how, we may say, the corresponding process of the continuous establishing and altering of horizons determined the relationship of Belinsky to Naimy.<sup>645</sup> For it is the dialectics in modern Russian literary criticism laid down by Belinsky in his *Literaturniye mechtaniya* (Literary Reveries) essays that created a template, a mode of critical thinking that responded on an emotional level to literature rather than pursuing a hermeneutic approach, for other critics to follow and embellish upon during the part of the nineteenth century that represented Russian literature's greatest epoch of achievement.

Naturally, there is also a tradition of critical writing in Arabic literature that forms an inherent part of the dialogical framework of Naimy's criticism. Literary criticism has been a part of the Arabic literary tradition for many centuries, at least as many as ten, when debates amongst intellectuals raged over the superiority of grammar and logic.<sup>646</sup> While we note Naimy's response to the heritage of Arabic literary criticism, this chapter shall concentrate on Naimy's reading of Russian literature and the debt that he owed to the Russian literary criticism movements of the nineteenth century – a debt that becomes increasingly evident when one attempts to trace a lineage from his

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<sup>644</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšīnṭun* (Beirut: Naufal, 1988), ch. *Fi russiya*, p.88. Giving a summary of the authors who had the greatest effect on him while he was in Poltava, Naimy states that Belinsky is, 'without contest the master of Russian critics.'

<sup>645</sup> Jauss (1982), p.23.

<sup>646</sup> See Wen-chin Ouyang, *Literary Criticism in Medieval Arabic-Islamic Culture: The Making of a Tradition* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1997), which considers the pervasiveness of literary criticism, while acknowledging its lack of status as an individual discipline, in the medieval era.

first collection of essays, *al-Ġirbāl* (The Sieve, 1923),<sup>647</sup> through to the assortment of essays and letters that formed his retrospective volume, *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd* (In the New Sieve, 1972).<sup>648</sup> In this latter collection especially, the weight Naimy places upon Russian rather than Arabic literature in both the contents of the essays and the medium through which he expresses himself clearly indicates to the reader where his points of literary communication lay.

To lend weight to this assertion we should go back to the early stages of Naimy's preoccupation with Russian literature, expressed in words from *Sab'ūn* that attempt to convey the depth of his love and admiration for the writers he was reading for the first time. His initial reading of Lermontov excited within Mikhail a desire to imitate his heroes in poetry:

Since I read Lermontov an uncontrollable desire to write poetry has possessed me... I shall go where my soul directs me. I shall follow the road that has continued to spur me on since my early boyhood ... That is the road of literature – my only road.<sup>649</sup>

As noted by Naimy in his diary of the time, these thoughts arrested him on March 27, 1908, when the author was only eighteen years old. That he should have been so captivated by Lermontov and his talent should perhaps not be so surprising – Lermontov himself was only twenty-four years old when he finally completed *The Demon* (the poem Naimy had been reading in Poltava), but had started work on the poem ten years earlier. (More interestingly, Belinsky, to whose critical works Naimy would soon be introduced, also saw Russian literature in the modern sense as beginning with Lermontov and

<sup>647</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl* (Beirut: Naufal, 1998), edition used for citations throughout.

<sup>648</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd* (Beirut: Naufal, 1988), edition used for citations throughout.

<sup>649</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.274.

Pushkin.<sup>650</sup>) Naimy's assertion that what he has to follow is 'the course of literature' directed him to the kinds of questions to which many other writers and critics have attempted to find answers. Naimy went on to opine in his diary in *Sab'ūn* that:

We [the Arabs] continue to lack literature in the proper sense of the word. We do not produce anything that could be called independent literature.<sup>651</sup>

Naimy was not being glib when he wrote these words in his diary, regardless of the evidence since compiled that Arabic literature had amassed a complex and rich tradition in prose and modern thinking by the start of the twentieth century,<sup>652</sup> but had come to such a conclusion by giving some serious consideration to the issues of what made great literature, how it ought to express the great human, philosophical ideas and how it ought to shape human society in general.<sup>653</sup> Building upon the ideas expressed in the quotation above in his collection of critical essays, *al-Ġirbāl*, Naimy arrived at the conclusion that Arabic literature was overly concerned with form and superficial rules and regulations regarding the composition of poetry.<sup>654</sup>

(Although this was a fairly common belief amongst Arab writers in the early

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<sup>650</sup> See David Powelstock, *Becoming Mikhail Lermontov: the ironies of romantic individualism in Nicholas I's Russia* (Evanston, IL: 2005) and Vissarion Belinsky, *Selected Philosophical Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1948), 'Articles on the Works of Alexander Pushkin.'

<sup>651</sup> *Sab'ūn* I, p.286.

<sup>652</sup> See Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (Cambridge: CUP, 1983) for an account of the rich vein in intellectual activity in the Arab world (in Egypt, especially) prompted by the works of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muḥammad 'Abduh, and Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse* (London: Saqī, 1993) for an exposition of the development of the Arabic short story.

<sup>653</sup> Naimy's views on what constitutes literature and what it ought to express were indelibly altered by reading Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (see *Sab'ūn* I).

<sup>654</sup> Essays from *al-Ġirbāl* that deal particularly with this issue include *Naḳīq al-dafadi'* (The Croaking of Frogs) and *al-Shi'r wa al-sha'ir* (Poetry and the Poet). They shall be dealt with in greater detail during the course of the chapter.

twentieth century, it also, as Jayyusi points out, indicates Naimy's lack of deep knowledge of classical Arabic literature.<sup>655</sup>) Naimy's separation of Russian literature from Arabic literature in these hierarchical terms shows that even during these early days in Poltava, Naimy was delving to the profundity of the matter in hand and asking himself questions such as what are the parameters for great literature and how is one meant to discern between what is truly great literature from what is just average.

Naimy wrestled with these themes during *al-Ġirbāl*, but also addressed them *en passant* for the rest of his writing career in many of the essays he wrote. This constitutes one of the main reasons why it is so important to comprehend the exact nature of Naimy's criticism in order to build a better picture of the dialogue between his works and those of Russian literature. Moreover, during this introduction we must ascertain what we mean when we refer to the works of literary criticism composed by Naimy, and how we propose to demarcate those literary criticism essays from his essays that just deal with aspects of life in a more general sense. Broadly speaking, it is a question of regular concordance of the essays in any of Naimy's collections to the theme of Arabic literature. While some of Naimy's collections of essays contain information that is pertinent to our studies here, such as the essays *Rūsīya allatī 'araftuhā* (The Russia that I Knew) in *an-Nūr wa-d-dajjūr* and *al-Adab wa-d-daula* (Literature and Nation) in *Fī mahabb ar-rīh*, the rest of the essays pertain to such a variegated selection of themes and socio-political and religious topics that they could not feasibly be recognised as complete works of literary criticism. Moreover, as the focus of both *al-Ġirbāl* and *Fī al-*

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<sup>655</sup> Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), p.109.

*ġirbāl al-jadīd* is consistently positioned on the poetics of modern Arabic literature, the texts can only be described as works of Arabic literary criticism. Thus, they are the collections that shall form the core material for our study.

Finally, we should mention here by way of introduction why we have felt it necessary to devote an entire chapter to the subject of Naimy's critical texts and the dialectics conceived within them. Naimy's original, creative literary texts stand on their own as intriguing indicators of how Arabic prose literature, drama and poetry had developed by the early twentieth century, but their importance is augmented by the texts Naimy devoted to the theory behind literary practice, which spell out his ideas and vision for how Arabic literature ought to progress. The essays that constitute *al-Ġirbāl* stand out not only for their comprehensive view on the problems faced by Arabic literature *in toto* and the measures Naimy prescribes in order for writers to challenge its deficiencies, but also for the fact that the author of the essays attempted to put his ideas into practice (especially) through the media of short stories and drama. *Sanatuhā al-jadīdah* and *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn*, to take two examples, are emblematic of Naimy attempting to put the ideas of *al-Ġirbāl* into concrete literary form.<sup>656</sup>

The writing of *al-Ġirbāl* did not arise out of a vacuum. All the circumstances that would have made for an often favourable, but certainly interested, reception of *al-Ġirbāl* came into position in the second decade of the twentieth century. New York offered a home to the Syro-Lebanese community where they could engage in business opportunities freely and fruitfully, and the

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<sup>656</sup> While this phenomenon is rare, it is by no means unique and seems to have been quite prevalent amongst literatures during the early part of the twentieth century. One may think of, for comparison, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn's essays on Arabic literary history, including *Fī-š-šī'r al-jāhilī* and *Mustaqbal al-Ṭaqafah fī miṣr*, and T.S. Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*.

capital raised supported the production of literary journals that might otherwise have floundered. Furthermore, both *al-Funūn* and *al-Sā'ih*<sup>657</sup> were owned by members of the close Syro-American literary circle. In particular, *al-Funūn* was owned and edited by a good school friend of Naimy, Nasīb 'Arīḍa, and his encouragement of Naimy led to Naimy's first few essays on literary criticism being printed in the journal, some of which would be included in *al-Ġirbāl*.<sup>658</sup> Perhaps most remarkably, however, Arabic literary criticism was undergoing something of a revolution in the Arab world, with the works of 'Abbas Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn creating surges of intellectual interest in Egypt that would spread from literature into society.<sup>659</sup> The western world, too, was favourably disposed to upsurges from new thinkers and writers in the forms of Woolf, Joyce and Eliot, amongst others, all of whom were helping to transform both literature and the environment that produced it. No society, however, seemed to be changing more than Russia, which was seemingly shelving its history and starting again with a blank sheet. The profound events of the Russian revolution occurred just a few years before the publication of *al-Ġirbāl* and Naimy's work reflects the kind of radical overhaul of society and political institutions that had such profound implications in his former country of residence.

Aside from this interesting aspect of Naimy's life and career, however, we should consider the evidence of scholarly works on modern Arabic literature

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<sup>657</sup> *As-Sā'ih* was owned by 'Abd al-Masīh Haddād, who wrote a collection of stories about the Arab immigrant experience in New York entitled *Hikāyāt al-mahjar*.

<sup>658</sup> As we have considered in some detail in the 'Modes of Expression' chapter.

<sup>659</sup> Al-'Aqqād was attempting to outline a new theory of literature, while Haykal was strongly engaged in defining a 'national' Egyptian literature, and both were inseparable from the society that was constructing the environment for these ideas. See David Semah, *Four Egyptian Literary Critics* (Leiden: Brill, 1974).

which attest to the fact that, alongside *Sab'ūn*, *al-Ġirbāl* has become something of a classic of Arabic literary criticism and continues to be quoted and discussed in a great many volumes on the history of Arabic literature.<sup>660</sup> Time inevitably reduces readership of most literary texts, but Naimy's capturing of an especial moment in Arabic literature (and his response to Russian literary criticism) means that *al-Ġirbāl* has become a text that, like Ḥusayn's *Fī-š-šī'r al-jāhilī*, demands to be read for its status as a significant junction along the course of Arabic literary criticism.

### Shared Backgrounds and Philosophies of Naimy and Belinsky

As we have noted in the politics chapter, the shared views of Naimy and Belinsky on the injustice perpetrated by imperial regimes made them compatible bedfellows, but this chapter shall delve into the critical ethos that both men held and the dialogue that resulted from their common intellectual position.

Belinsky's works had a troubled publishing history, both in their distribution and in their reception.<sup>661</sup> In particular, Belinsky's provocative letter to Gogol in response to the *Dead Souls* author's publication of *Selected Correspondence with Friends* became 'the bible of Russian revolutionaries'<sup>662</sup> and was an

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<sup>660</sup> Obviously, the titles are far too numerous to name here, but historical accounts of the development of Arabic literary criticism, such as Iḥṣān 'Abbas' *Tārīḫ an-naqd al-adabī 'inda-l-'arab* (Beirut: Dār al-Amāna, 1971), reference Naimy's *al-Ġirbāl* as a matter of course.

<sup>661</sup> Alexis Pogorelskin states that 'censorship banned the appearance of Belinsky's name in print' in 1850s Russia ("The Messenger of Europe" from Martinsen (ed.), p.134), while N. A. Dobrolyubov writing in *Sovremennik* in 1859 (No.4) (*Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. J. Fineberg (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1948), p.173 ('The Works of V. Belinsky')) stated: 'Russia still knows little of Belinsky. He rarely signed his essays with his own name, and now that his works are being published it transpires that even literary men cannot point with certainty to all the essays he wrote.'

<sup>662</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* (London: Penguin, 2008), p.198.

indirect cause of Dostoevsky being sent to Siberia.<sup>663</sup> As this quotation from Berlin shows, Belinsky's popularity was a direct result of his brazenness in the face of oppression:

The literary reminiscences of the young radicals of the 1830s and 1840s – Panaev and his wife, Turgenev, Herzen, Annenkov, Ogareva, Dostoevsky – agree in stressing this aspect of Belinsky as the 'conscience' of the Russian intelligentsia, the inspired and fearless publicist, the ideal of the young *révoltés*, the writer who almost alone in Russia had the character and the eloquence to proclaim clearly and harshly what many felt, but either could not or would not openly declare.<sup>664</sup>

Naimy was not only excited by Belinsky's attachment to literary ideals that reflect the honesty and authenticity of the artist, but also his idea that a nation can define itself through literature (as shall be discussed below) and that the authorities of that nation should be subject to scrutiny.<sup>665</sup> By 1906, when he arrived in Poltava, Naimy was well acquainted with the idea that literature could excite through its ideas, although his background up to this point had cemented the belief that Arabic literature could offer no such excitement through its own literary texts. Arabic literature, in Naimy's opinion, was defined by superficial verbal acrobatics that did nothing to hoist it up out of the darkness in which it seemed so entrenched. Before leaving for Poltava, Naimy had versed himself in the finer poetic passages of the Bible (particularly *The*

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<sup>663</sup> Ibid.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid., pp.170-1.

<sup>665</sup> Recent studies have been made about Belinsky's lasting and profound influence at the turn of the twentieth century (see E. Yu. Tikhonova, *Russkie mysliteli o V.G. Belinskom (vtoraia polovina XIX--pervaia polovina XX v.)* (Moscow: Sovpadenie, 2009)).

*Song of Songs* and other Old Testament verses that he had learnt as a result of his early schooling in Baskinta) and had read some of the Arabic prose classic works, such as *Kalīla wa dimna*, but it was not until he had enough of a grasp on the Russian language in order to attempt a reading of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* that Naimy found literature that could finally make him quiver with the ideas that it instilled in him.

I remember that I tried one time to read *Crime and Punishment* and felt like someone who had delved into a great treasure and did not have sufficient tools to study it.<sup>666</sup>

It may seem to the theosophic reader as if the meeting between Naimy and Belinsky's works would have been part of the *an-nizām al-kaunī*, the universal system that Naimy reiterated so as to explain his belief in the possibility of an interconnected world where kindred spirits gravitated towards each other through their similar energies. As we have seen, however, the revolutionary fervour present in Poltava, just like the rest of the Russian Empire, at the time of Naimy studying in its seminary combined with the author's love of Russian literature made their meeting inevitable. It is, therefore, no surprise that Krachkovsky and Ode-Vasilyeva should have sensed the presence of Belinsky's aesthetics in Naimy's writings when they first encountered *al-Ġirbāl*.<sup>667</sup>

Vissarion Belinsky's writings did not come out of a vacuum and were helped along by some fairly unlikely allies, considering his later, both written

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<sup>666</sup> *Ab'ad min mūskū wa min wāšintun*, p.67.

<sup>667</sup> Aida Imangulieva, *Jibrān, Rihani & Naimy: East-West interactions in early twentieth century Arab literature* (Oxford: Inner Farne, 2009), p.125. Krachkovsky states this explicitly in the preface to his biographical essay on Naimy ('Avtobiografia Mikhaila Nuaima,' in I. Yu.Krachkovsky, *Izbrannie sochinenie*, (Moscow and Leningrad, 1956) vol.3, p.223).

and unwritten, anti-authoritarian polemics. Prince Pyotr Andreevich Viazemsky, a poet, belles-lettrist and literary critic of the early nineteenth century, had remarked as early as 1823 that Russian literature was in a dreadful state and had nothing to offer the rest of the world:

Literature should be the expression of the character and opinions of a people. Judging by the books which are printed in our country, one might conclude either that we have no literature or that we have neither character nor opinions.<sup>668</sup>

Early rumblings of literary discontent and a feeling of inadequacy in comparison to Western European culture tended to come from the aristocracy for the natural reason that they were in a position where they could make a valid comparison. Foreign travel was a practical impossibility for serfs who were usually tied to an immediate locale, and in any case would have lacked the money and linguistic capabilities to go abroad.<sup>669</sup> Resultantly, such privileges were restricted to the aristocracy. Furthermore, from the time of Peter the Great there had been a general shift in the aesthetics of aspiration away from an indigenous Slavonic culture towards European culture in general, intellectually, specifically, to the country that was a philosophical powerhouse of the time, the German confederation.<sup>670</sup>

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<sup>668</sup> Prince Pyotr Andreevich Viazemsky, 'Zamechaniia na kratkoe obozrenie russkoi literatury 1822-go goda' (1823), *Polnoe sobranie sochineni*, ed., Count S. D. Sheremetev (St Petersburg, 1878), I, 103. Quoted in Herbert E. Bowman, *Vissarion Belinski 1811-1848: A Study in the Origins of Social Criticism in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), p.15.

<sup>669</sup> Although there were great variances between the prospects of different types of serfs, their prospects were generally hindered by the lack of social mobility (see Easley (2009) and David Christian, *Imperial and Soviet Russia: Power, Privilege, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Longman 1994)).

<sup>670</sup> As is detailed by Berlin (2008) in ch. 'German Romanticism in Petersburg and Moscow.' James Cracraft, *The Revolution of Peter the Great* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) gives an account of the changes in Russia at this time, which Cracraft describes as a 'cultural revolution.'

The term 'aesthetics of aspiration' will need to be unpacked in order to make sense in the context. When Viazemsky produced his damning verdict of Russian literature, he made the observation that literature helps to form the character of the empire that produces it, and vice versa. The Russian Empire's dearth of good literature was a symptom of a lack of capable writers and arresting and exciting ideas: a virus that could be combated by interaction with the west. It became clear to commentators of the immediate post-Napoleonic invasion (1812) era that adoption of some western models of enlightenment was essential, but this embracement needed to be checked:

In their awareness of the problem of Russian literature and Russian society, perceptive critics like Prince P. A. Viazemski and Prince A. I. Odoevski [Aleksandr Ivanovich (1803-39)] realized already in the twenties that until Russia attained a higher degree of cultural self-determination, its literature would be doomed to vacillate between extremes of imitation of foreign models at one pole, and a narrow provincialism at the other.<sup>671</sup>

While blind imitation of Western European, mainly French and German, models would not promote Russian literature to the extent that Viazemski and Odoevski obviously wanted and could result in uninspired and thoughtless mimicry, some dialogue with Western European literature was necessary in order to appropriate the same techniques and ideas that had made their traditions so successful. Of all Western European literatures, and bearing in mind the potential pitfalls in making generalisations about 'national'

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<sup>671</sup> Bowman (1954), p.11.

literatures<sup>672</sup>, that Russian writers could have heralded as the pinnacle of achievement, it was to German romanticism that the great Russian thinkers of the nineteenth century turned, a tradition that 'not only shared the high regard for the poet and his work which characterises nineteenth-century romanticism generally, but it was distinguished by the degree to which it made that emphasis a subject of serious and technical philosophical elaboration.'<sup>673</sup> The combination of philosophy and literature that attracted the Russian thinkers towards German romanticism finds an analogous situation in the circumstances surrounding Naimy's stance towards Arabic literature while in Poltava; Naimy came to a very similar conclusion, that a foreign literature would provide the template for his own, only he would use Russian literature for his master dialogue instead of German romanticism.

The main reason for Germany being such a powerful correspondent with Russian literature is to be found in the profound change in thinking that came about during the eighteenth century as metaphysics and the works of Hegel came to the fore in philosophical thinking, and the formidable artists of the *Sturm und Drang* movement made a considerable impact on both the German cultural scene and that of Europe.<sup>674</sup> After the positivism of the Enlightenment, German thinkers such as Herder, Fichte and Schelling 'successfully undermined the central dogma of eighteenth-century enlightenment, that the

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<sup>672</sup> The point I address here is, essentially, that national literatures may include books not written in the modern standard language (a history of English literature would usually include, for instance, both Chaucer's works and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*), and that the boundaries of a national literature are necessarily fluid. See Anderson (2004), Gregory Jusdanis, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture: Inventing National Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1991), and Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *Building a National Literature: The Case of Germany 1830-1870* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>673</sup> Bowman (1954), p.11.

<sup>674</sup> See David Hill (ed.), *Literature of the Sturm und Drang* (Rochester: Camden House, 2003) for a variety of essays on the topic, and Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) for an account from a Russian specialist.

only reliable method of discovery or interpretation was that of the triumphant mechanical sciences.<sup>675</sup> Berlin goes on to say that the works of these thinkers, particularly Schelling, owed more to the Platonic tradition: ‘spiritual insight, “intuitive” knowledge of connections incapable of scientific analysis.’<sup>676</sup> Schelling’s central contention of universal dynamics, as we can see, can in some ways be seen as a root from which Naimy, through Belinsky and Russian literature, will eventually grow:

Schelling [...] spoke in terms of a universal mystical vision. He saw the universe as a single spirit, a great, animate organism, a soul or self, evolving from one spiritual stage into another. Individual human beings were, as it were, ‘finite centres,’ ‘aspects,’ ‘moments’ of this enormous cosmic entity – the ‘living whole,’ the world soul, the transcendental Spirit or Idea, descriptions of which almost recall the fantasies of early Gnosticism.<sup>677</sup>

Over and above Schelling rose another German intellectual, to whom the birth of the Russian intelligentsia owed a great debt: Hegel. Berlin remarks that during the ‘remarkable decade’ of 1838-48, when the progenitors of the Russian intelligentsia, Bakunin, Herzen and Belinsky amongst them, reached the peaks of their creativity and industriousness:

Hegel and Hegelianism dominated the thought of young Russia. With all the moral ardour of which they were capable, the emancipated young men believed in the necessity of total immersion in his philosophy. Hegel was the great new liberator; therefore it was a duty –

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<sup>675</sup> Berlin, p.156.

<sup>676</sup> Ibid.

<sup>677</sup> Ibid., p.157.

a categorical duty – to express in every act of your life, whether as a private individual or as a writer, truths which you had absorbed from him.<sup>678</sup>

The burgeoning Russian intelligentsia distilled the dogma of German romanticism into a couple of elemental principles: that the west had become a victim of its own scientific and rational success; and that their intellectual generators had abandoned spiritualism and left a void that untrained, so-called barbarous according to Berlin (who likens the west of the early nineteenth century to the decaying Roman Empire)<sup>679</sup>, traditions could fill with their metaphysical ideas. These youthful traditions would forge a union between the spiritual and physical in their writings – a concept that we have seen practised constantly in the literary texts of Mikhail Naimy<sup>680</sup> – and, fortuitously, the dynamics of the literary industry had just the appropriate mechanisms to push their ideas forward.

When Belinsky started to come to prominence in Russia, he owed part of his sudden intellectual distinction to the rise of the literary journal.<sup>681</sup> In the early nineteenth century, just as prose fiction was starting to take a hold on the imagination of the Russian reading public, so too was the immediacy and convenience of the new literary journal format. Naimy's parallel emergence onto the Arabic literary scene deserves to be noted here, as do the correspondences regarding the newness of Arabic prose fiction forms, the

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<sup>678</sup> Ibid., p.150.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

<sup>680</sup> Naimy's novels are a better place to see this process in action, particularly *Mirdād* and *Al-Yaum al-akīr*, as the longer texts allow the spiritualist concepts to develop in the fiction, as per the works of German romanticism.

<sup>681</sup> As discussed in the previous 'Modes of Expression' chapter.

novel and short story, and its own literary journals.<sup>682</sup> Naimy managed to get his essays on Arabic literature printed through a community of like-minded individuals living in the Syro-American community in New York, one of whom, Nasīb 'Arīḍa, had the good fortune and presence of mind to be both a poet and a businessman. What 'Arīḍa's *al-Funūn* was to Naimy, Nikolai Ivanovich Nadezhdin's *Teleskop* (The Telescope) was to Belinsky<sup>683</sup>: a literary output for the initial ideas and creativity that needed to be transmitted to the reading public via a medium that was more fluid, less temporally and financially restricted, and more open to change than a printed book, in which their later ideas would become concretised.

The directness, familiarity and immediacy of the literary journals *al-Funūn* and *Teleskop* was all the more vital given the political conditions under which both publications were functioning. Belinsky's literary and political activities started in earnest when he entered Moscow University in 1829 – a time of political turmoil and disillusionment with the restored monarchy in France<sup>684</sup> – and led up to the Europe-wide (notable exceptions being Great Britain and the Russian Empire) revolutions of 1848.<sup>685</sup> Correspondingly, Naimy began to connect intellectually with Belinsky and other writers in the Russian critical tradition in Poltava in 1906-11, an era that was sandwiched between major revolutions and characterised by social upheaval in Russia. (The first Russian

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<sup>682</sup> See Hafez (1993) and Abu Hanna (2005). Abu Hanna in particular documents the role of the Syro-American literary journals in the literary renaissance in Palestine.

<sup>683</sup> See Bowman, chapter 3, and the essay by William Todd Mills III, 'Periodicals in literary life of the early nineteenth century,' from *Literary Journals in Imperial Russia* (Martinsen (ed.)).

<sup>684</sup> Belinsky, who took an interest in France, would have been aware of this. See Jeremy D. Popkin, *Press, Revolution and Social Identities in France, 1830-1835* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2002).

<sup>685</sup> See Taylor (1991), ch.1.

revolution of the twentieth century took place in 1905 and the second major uprising would occur six years after Naimy left, in 1917.<sup>686</sup>) Moreover, Naimy produced his first works for *al-Funūn* against the backdrop of the opening movements to the Great War<sup>687</sup>, a time when the identities of nations in the Arab world were to a large extent being decided by both internal and external strife. Consequently, Naimy's own remarkable twelve years between arriving at Poltava and the termination of *al-Funūn* in 1918 saw an unprecedented amount of political activity amongst the underclass, whose tribulations Belinsky had championed during his creative years. From the proletariat of the Russian empire, to the Young Turks in the Ottoman Empire and the radical influence of Sa'd Zağlūl, popular movements were suddenly asking fundamental questions about the rights of the masses and the political powers that sought to constrain them.

Under these kinds of conditions, new schools of literature emerged that allied themselves with the exciting activist thinkers of the time. While (early twentieth century) revolutionary Russia witnessed the formation of the *Sreda* group of writers<sup>688</sup>, and the Ottoman Empire the *Edebiyyât-ı Cedîde* (New Literature) movement<sup>689</sup>, the key facets that all such forums had in common was a willingness and ability to examine the fundamentals of literature and the

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<sup>686</sup> It could be claimed, however, that Naimy was in Poltava while Russia was still in a revolutionary period. Jonathon D. Smele and Anthony Heywood (eds.), *The Russian Revolution of 1905: Centenary Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) argues that 'widespread agitation against the autocracy [...] did not end until June 1907,' (p.1).

<sup>687</sup> By this I mean that the diplomatic wranglings between the European powers, not to mention the Balkan wars (see Taylor (1991) ch.XXI) that eventually led to the First World War were well underway by the time that Naimy produced his first work for *al-Funūn* 1 (No. 4, July 1913), 'Fajr al-amal ba'd layla al-ya's' ('The Dawn of Hope after the Night of Despair').

<sup>688</sup> See previous 'Modes of Expression' chapter.

<sup>689</sup> Started in 1891 and followed by the *Fecr-i âfî* (Impending Dawn) movement. See M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p.141.

ambition to propel their literatures in a radically new and different direction. It was following such similar criteria that Naimy began to write in New York in the early twentieth century, succeeding analogous circumstances that had moulded Belinsky's work in St Petersburg and Moscow in the 1840s. Above all else, the most significant spirit of Belinsky's works that Naimy imbibed before he set about writing the texts of *al-Ġirbāl* was that, in such politically turbulent times, definitions of literature were neither established nor inflexible, and that everything was open to fresh interpretation and examination.

### **The Arrival of *al-Funūn* and the Inception of *al-Ġirbāl***

As we asserted in the previous chapter, Naimy's reaction to receiving *al-Funūn* for the first time was one of joy and surprise at its devotion to Russian literature and at the quality of original Arabic pieces by, amongst others, Jibrān. Here, Naimy gives a more contextual view of his reaction to the arrival of the journal:

My knowledge of Arabic letters was that cobwebs of inflexibility, blind imitation, hypocrisy, and of intellectual and spiritual poverty, had been woven like a shroud over them; and that five centuries of dust had accumulated over those shrouds. Praise be whosoever breathes life into the decaying bones!<sup>690</sup>

Naimy's sentiments written fifty years after the fact bear an intriguing resemblance to the type of picture Belinsky paints of Russian literature in his

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<sup>690</sup> *Sab'ūn* II, p.34. (The word 'inflexibility' in my translation is *jumūd* in the original text, which can also be rendered as 'frozenness' – another popular Naimy trope.)

*Literary Reveries*, although in this case Belinsky mourns the loss of the life-giving breath:

Do you remember that blissful time, when a breath of life seemed to have stirred in our literature, when talent appeared after talent, poem after poem, novel after novel, periodical after periodical, almanac after almanac [...] The stilts of our literary athletes have snapped, the straw stage has collapsed on which golden mediocrity was wont to climb, and silenced, mute and vanquished are those few and slight talents we had so fondly believed in.<sup>691</sup>

The grand, sweeping gestures employed by both writers to describe their respective literatures imply a state of despair that can be quickly lifted by the arrival of a redeeming talent; they also provide examples of critics stretching metaphors over numerous sentences in order to emphasise their points. In Belinsky's case, Pushkin was the demi-god of Russian literature whose 'songs first wafted to us the breath of Russian life.'<sup>692</sup> (Both critics employ the idea of breath in their imagery to imply not just a sense of pumping oxygen into starved bodies, but also in the cathartic meaning to convey the sensation of old dust and decay being swept away with fresh air.) Regrettably, in Belinsky's opinion, and this is a key facet of his critical principles, the lauding of Pushkin has led too readily to 'awarding the laurels of genius' to a whole rack of insubstantial and untalented writers who bear no legitimate claim to be a laureate.<sup>693</sup> The apocalyptic conclusion that Belinsky comes to – and in this

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<sup>691</sup> Belinsky (1948), p.3.

<sup>692</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>693</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31.

he is no less dramatic than Naimy – is that in his country, ‘we have no literature.’<sup>694</sup> After all, ‘in a waste every one can be king.’<sup>695</sup>

It was with a similar sense of regret and disdain for the past but with an equally virulent optimism for the future that Naimy wrote *Fajr al-amal ba’d laylat al-ya’s* (The Dawn of Hope after the Night of Despair) for *al-Funūn*. The article is summed up by Nadeem Naimy:

The article, a sharp attack on the existing literary sterility (Night of Despair) in the Arab world, on the one hand, and a careful outline of the basic characteristics of the new, living literature (Dawn of Hope) expected of the new generation, was warmly welcomed and published by *al-Funūn*.<sup>696</sup>

When Naimy came to write his next piece for *al-Funūn* he submitted another essay called *al-Ḥubāḥib* (Fireflies). Printed in *al-Funūn* 1, No.5 (August 1913) after poems by the Russian symbolist, Fyodor Sologub, and the Austrian Modernist, Peter Altenberg, both of whom represented in different ways the new directions and new possibilities that modern Arabic literature, in *al-Funūn*’s opinion, could potentially take, his essay dared to attack all the long-standing maxims that the perceived Arabic literary establishment took for granted and proposed a new understanding of literature.

One of the main themes of *al-Ḥubāḥib* is the irrelevance of the classical Arabic literary corpus to the modern age, a strand of thought that is revisited in a great many of Naimy’s essays. It is indicative of the content of the essay, which leans favourably in the direction of western prose and its ingenuities,

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<sup>694</sup> Ibid., p.5 passim.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>696</sup> Nadeem Naimy, p.114.

that Naimy should commence the work with epigraphs from a selection of western writers, including a quotation from *The Rainy Day* by Longfellow ('Be still, sad heart, and cease repining; Behind the clouds is the sun still shining'), and Ibsen on the 'literary crime' of suicide.<sup>697</sup> From this point, Naimy begins a dismantling of many of the tenets that traditional Arabic literature holds dear. From the beginning of the essay, Naimy does not restrain his words in his judgment of Arab writers in comparison to their western counterparts:

Our writers [i.e. those in the past] had a special talent for picking their subjects. They did not consider the sphere of possession of human intellect anything other than the delving into and blackening [i.e. with ink] of mountains of paper on the subject.<sup>698</sup>

The tone is bitterly sarcastic and unyielding in its ridiculing animosity towards the thinkers and writers of the past who paid so much attention to the expected norms and practices of the canon of Arabic literature. Furthermore, their literature had had a moralising tone that grated Naimy to the point of distraction. Centring in on some of their more homiletic writing causes Naimy to train his criticism towards acidic sniping:

And they didn't forget to give "Covetousness" an ample share [in their writings]. Yet the fact escaped them that they were the most covetous of the covetous.<sup>699</sup>

The iconoclastic nature of Naimy's attack on the heritage of Arabic literature borrows its terms from the unflinching foundations Belinsky set out for his own 'Literary Reveries' in *The Telescope*, and also, as Aida

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<sup>697</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.39

<sup>698</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>699</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

Imangulieva points out, bears the hallmark of Belinsky's summary reviews offered to the Russian public.<sup>700</sup> We detect an intimation in both writers' works that they are setting out a future for their respective literatures upon the notion, tacitly shared between reader and writer, that they are at a kind of year zero, with the new literature waiting to be written according to their standards and expectations. There is communicated a sense in both writers that theirs is a literary criticism propelled by emotion and instinctive reactions to literary texts, rather than a hermeneutic exercise. Naimy, with his subtle destruction of the reputations of so many admired Arab writers, shares Belinsky's aggressive self-confidence when the latter asked in *The Telescope*, 'Is it true that we have no literature?' before proclaiming despondently, 'Yes, it is true that we have no literature.'<sup>701</sup>

The breadth of Naimy's vision in *al-Ḥubāḥib* is ambitious. Right from the second page, his targets for belittlement include al-Mutanabbī, possibly one of the most esteemed poets in the whole of Arabic literature, the Umayyad poet, al-Aḳṭal, and the famous Arab satirist and panegyrist, al-Farazdaq.<sup>702</sup> Naimy posits the hypothesis that a published poet may want to write a few words of praise for his friend and, in doing so, would find that al-Mutanabbī had already used the phrasing to describe the riverside of the country;<sup>703</sup> if he chooses to change his eulogy to a lampoon, he would find that 'al-Farazdaq and al-Aḳṭal and others had monopolised the lampoon and had not deemed it a gateway

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<sup>700</sup> Imangulieva (2009), p.131.

<sup>701</sup> Belinsky, p.3.

<sup>702</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.40.

<sup>703</sup> The word al-Mutanabbī uses is *saif*, a word rich in *jinās* (pun, paronomasia) potentiality as it means both 'sword' and 'bank' or 'riverside.'

[to other genres].<sup>704</sup> The idea Naimy is expressing is that the classical poets, perhaps unconsciously, have been largely responsible for allowing Arabic literature to get stuck in the rut that it is currently occupying. As Naimy asks in the article:

Can we blame the modern writers, even as they look down on us every day with their patched-together poems and articles on subjects that come from the mouths of the past?<sup>705</sup>

Aside from having a decorative aspect to them not completely unlike the linguistic and stylistic acrobatics that made up so much of the Arabic literature that Naimy was railing against, fireflies are also an insubstantial light in the darkness, too feeble to show the road ahead, and they are what so many modern poets have become.<sup>706</sup> So much, in Naimy's opinion (and we have already referred to his trope of Arabic literature being stuck in the darkness in both this and previous chapters), of literature written in the Ottoman period was vain and inconsequential,<sup>707</sup> verbal stylistics that were intended to appear impressive and beautiful on the page but which had no real substance to their meaning. Under the cover of night, the fireflies fulfil a similar purpose to the vainglorious trinkets of Arabic literature in the Ottoman period; fireflies are pretty in the evening sky, but once, 'The sun comes up, the winds blow, and the rains pour, the plough on the earth brings nothing more than echo upon

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<sup>704</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.40.

<sup>705</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39.

<sup>706</sup> Incidentally, and I say this to underline the extent of its usage, *Ḳalīl Jibrān* also employed the image of the firefly, albeit in a tropically different image: 'Shall the nightingale offend the stillness of the night, or the firefly the stars?' (*The Prophet* (London: Penguin, 2002))

<sup>707</sup> See his reference to the 'five centuries of dust' mentioned before in connection with receiving *al-Funūn* for the first time (*Sab'ūn* II, p.34).

echo.<sup>708</sup> Fireflies are symptomatic of an Arab culture which is afflicted by a number of problems. Firstly, on the subject of quality, the Arab world is unable to differentiate between true and sham beauty, like the difference between a diamond and a piece of glass.<sup>709</sup> Secondly, while the rest of the western world sees its culture transformed by the emphasis placed upon science and intellect, Naimy observes that the Arab world remains stubbornly unaffected by such enlightenment, 'like a stone in a blowing wind.'<sup>710</sup>

*Al-Ḥubāḥib* was typical of the type of literary idea that Naimy adopted as a defining trope to explain phenomena in Arabic literature, and then lengthened to become a serious and detailed account of a certain problem that was stalling the progress towards a serious, modern prose genre. Both Naimy and Belinsky viewed modern literature through a long perspective, sweeping centuries of tradition into a single sentence, and both at times despaired of the ability of the current age to produce the literature required of them. As Naimy reckoned, 'It is difficult – much more difficult than finding the poles of the earth – for the sons of this age to find new expressions for their pens.'<sup>711</sup> Nevertheless, for as long as his focus was trained towards contemporary literature, Naimy could see the possibility for adaptation and regeneration in all kinds of literary fields. Naimy's reference to the Lebanese academic (and

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<sup>708</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.55.

<sup>709</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, pp.46-7.

<sup>710</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>711</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.41.

erstwhile correspondent of Krachkovsky<sup>712</sup>), Louis Cheikho<sup>713</sup>, highlights his almost slavish dedication to *an-nahḍah* and modern, progressive Arabic literature and scholarship; Naimy was searching, like Belinsky in his *Literary Reveries*, for any indications of light in the darkness. The reference to Cheikho is also emblematic of the pride Naimy felt in Arabic literature and scholarship, in spite of all the evident shortcomings of Arabic literature that he details on other pages.

For all the evident correlations between Belinsky's and Naimy's works, there is a very real sense that each author is negotiating his critical position with specific reference to their backgrounds and individual socio-political circumstances. While contemporary radical politics are present in Belinsky's essays, Christian and / or biblical allusions are consistently evident in Naimy's works. To take one example of this, we can look at Naimy's Belinsky-esque assertion in *al-Ḥubāḥib*:

Life lies in criticism and renewal. Life lies in the tree of knowledge of both good and bad!<sup>714</sup>

Naimy's assertions above form part of his response to an American colleague, who has asked Naimy for his consideration on who is the most famous writer in Syria. Interpreting the question as a patronising snipe, Naimy's contemplation of the query forms a large part of the text of *al-Ḥubāḥib*. Aside from drawing the reader's attention directly to the part of the

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<sup>712</sup> Cheikho corresponded with Krachkovsky and assisted the latter in his studies into modern Arabic literature (RAN).

<sup>713</sup> Cheikho was actually born in Mardin, Turkey, in 1859, but moved to Lebanon in 1868. Aside from his periods of study in England, Austria and France, he remained in Lebanon until his death in 1927 (Brill Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three, online).

<sup>714</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.45: 'Satan came to me in the form of this American to punish me because my dear ancestor Eve had eaten of the sacred apple.'

essay where Naimy had likened his American inquisitor to the serpent in the Garden of Eden who was now punishing him for Eve's error<sup>715</sup>, the quotation shows up Naimy's philosophical position regarding Christian ideology and epistemology. Nabil I. Matar has already looked at this question in some detail regarding Naimy's reading of Ophitic Gnosticism<sup>716</sup> and how his view of the trope of the serpent directed his fiction, especially *Mirdād*:

The traditional picture of the serpent in Christian doctrine is of an evil, malicious and deceitful creature, the cause of man's fall and ejection from Eden. Naimy, however, has something different to say: for him the serpent is the greatest blessing and guide, the voice of human reason that incites man towards knowledge. It is God's tool and instrument in effecting the perfection of Adam and Eve. For it awakened in them the desire towards experience and took them out of childhood into maturity.<sup>717</sup>

This assertion is furnished with a supporting quotation from Naimy's *Mirdād*:

And the serpent that beguiled Eve to taste of Good and Evil, was he not the deeper voice of active, yet inexperienced, Duality urging itself to act and to experience?<sup>718</sup>

Matar also points out that the descriptions of the serpent as blessing and guide, and as the voice of human reason, are both conceptual features of

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<sup>715</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.43.

<sup>716</sup> A faith system that views the serpent of the Garden of Eden as the source and promoter of knowledge on earth (Tuomas Rasimus, 'Ophite Gnosticism, Sethianism and the Nag Hammadi Library' (Vigiliae Christianae, Vol.59, No.3 (Aug. 2005))).

<sup>717</sup> Nabil I. Matar, 'Adam and the Serpent: Notes on the Theology of Mikhail Naimy' (Journal of Arabic Literature, Vol.11 (1980)).

<sup>718</sup> Ibid.

another of Naimy's works, *Ya ibn ādam!*<sup>719</sup> The consistency of his intellectual positions, although they differ radically from the heavily political framework in which Belinsky, Dobrolyubov and others worked in, and the expression of them in a number of different forms finds its origins in Naimy's reading of Russian literary critics and in the fundamental critical concepts he established for himself while in Poltava.

While Naimy began to expound his theory of theosis in both his fictional texts and philosophical essays and live his life according to his set of principles, slowly moving from the quest for truth and abandonment of outdated literary dogma that had characterised his essays for *al-Funūn*, Belinsky seemed to embody the egalitarian notions of the German thinkers and thus 'applied an acquaintance with philosophical thought to the construction of a personal creed.'<sup>720</sup> Isaiah Berlin quotes Herzen to illustrate Belinsky's dedication to his personal convictions in spite of his ill health in this passage from *Russian Thinkers*:

[W]hen his dearest convictions were touched [...] he would fling himself at his victim like a leopard, he would tear him to pieces, make him ridiculous, make him pitiful, and in the course of it would develop his own thought with astonishing power and poetry. The argument would often end in blood which poured from the sick man's throat; pale, choking, with eyes fixed on whoever he was addressing, he would, with

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<sup>719</sup> *Ya ibn adam!* (Beirut: Naufal, 1988). The novel is discussed further in the third chapter.

<sup>720</sup> Bowman (1954), p.44.

a trembling hand, lift the handkerchief to his mouth, and stop – terribly upset, undone by his lack of physical strength.<sup>721</sup>

There is an overwhelming sense of the security of their beliefs in both Belinsky and Naimy. While Belinsky was unafraid to disabuse his hosts of their comfortable conservatism, Naimy takes similar risks with his readership during the rest of the essay, *al-Ḥubāḥib*. Accepting no line of moderation, Naimy attacks the proud Arab self-delusion that was cutting Arabic literature off from the rest of the world. ‘The calamity is not that we are genuinely poor, but that we are poor but continue to describe ourselves as rich as Croesus,’<sup>722</sup> is one such expression of his discontent with his fellow Arab critics’ tendency to rest on their laurels. Drawing on the same trope of darkness that Naimy so often employs in his essays, Belinsky also reproaches Russian literature for, we might say, venturing to punch above its weight:

We have a sordid, *ha’penny* literature which lurks in the holes and corners of rag fairs, breathes the rotten air of dank and gloomy cellars and subsists on the slender tribute of ragged ignorance. [...] One remarkable trait of this ha’penny literature, *inter alia*, is the astonishing firmness with which it struts the once-trodden path, and the patriarchal, naively effusive candour with which it treats the public.<sup>723</sup>

Furthermore, similar critics’ fascination with and reverence for the past and the names of Imru’ al-Qays, Avicenna, Averroes, al-Mutanabbī, and so on are discredited. With a youthful flurry of punkish disrespect that he predicts will

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<sup>721</sup> ‘Byloe i dumy,’ part 4 (‘Moskva, Peterburg i Novgorod (1840-1847)’), chapter 25, H ix 31; M ii 411. Quoted in Berlin (2008), p.175.

<sup>722</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.47.

<sup>723</sup> Belinsky, p.187.

rattle his critics, Naimy dismisses the achievements of the hallowed names and queries whether any of them are as relevant today as their western counterparts, the last of which named is Tolstoy:

I can hear the voices shouting back and forth at me, I can see the hands stretched out towards me, tongues lashing at me in vengeance, and all of them are saying: "Have you forgotten, or are you ignorant of, the names Imru' al-Qays, the poetic genius al-Ḍubiyānī, Labīd, 'Alqama al-Faḥl, 'Antarah, al-Muhalhal, al-Mutanabbī, al-Hamaḍānī, al-Akṭal, Jarīr, Ibn Rušd, Ibn Sīnā, and the rest of the ancients, or Šawqī, Hāfiḏ, Mutrān, and the many others of the moderns?

Of course, sir, I have not forgotten about all of them. I would not dare to disturb their restful slumber in their graves, nor raise my sinful eyes towards the crowns of laurels and haloes of light above their heads that still seem alive. I merely want to whisper it to you so as not to arouse their anger, that they are more gaunt than corpulent, and that, taking all of them individually, to all I would not think it just to raise them to the ranks of Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Hugo, Zola, Goethe, Heine or Tolstoy.<sup>724</sup>

Naimy was writing this in an Arabic literary context where widespread change, represented in Egypt amongst others by Maḥmūd al-Bārūdī (the 'poet of the renaissance'<sup>725</sup>), was set against nostalgia and stagnation, seen in the popularity of the Neo-Classical poet, Aḥmad Šawqī. As Naimy confirms later, 'Understanding has not been freed from the delusions of the past, the

<sup>724</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.50-1.

<sup>725</sup> Brill Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three, online.

apparitions and deception of the future, in order to comprehend its present.<sup>726</sup>

In the rest of the collection *al-Ġirbāl*, Naimy set out how modern Arabic literature may do exactly that.

### The Sifting of Literature

A single question perplexed Belinsky in a great many of his essays: what constitutes great literature? One only needs to read an article such as his examination of the Russian short story and its origins in the literary titans Goethe and Schiller to understand his obsession with the nature and heritage of great literature.<sup>727</sup> Chernyshevsky similarly divided literature up into works which would prove their social usefulness and those that did not.<sup>728</sup> Dobrolyubov also pursued similar themes in his literary explorations by divining what the public wanted from Russian literature.<sup>729</sup> Naimy commences his essay, *al-Ġarbalah* (Sifting), with a single line that is difficult to translate as it features too near identical synonyms: ‘Likewise, whosoever sifts the people filters them.’<sup>730</sup> What my translation attempts to get across is the slight difference in connotation between Naimy’s first verb (*ġarbala*) and his second (*naḳala*), both of which denote sifting. *ġarbala* ought to be a basic, almost neutral word meaning the sifting process, separating small particles from the rest; *naḳala*, which I have rendered as ‘filters,’ should prompt the reader to

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<sup>726</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.52.

<sup>727</sup> *O russkoi povesti i povestiyakh g. Gogolya*, in V. G. Belinsky, *O drame i teatre* (Moscow: Iskysstvo, 1983).

<sup>728</sup> M. G. Zel’dovich, *Chernyshevsky i problemi kritiki* (Kharkov: Izdatel'stvo kharkovskovo universiteta, 1968), ch.III.

<sup>729</sup> *Shto takoe oblomovshchina?* (What is Oblomovism?) from *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1948).

<sup>730</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.13.

consider the purity of that which is sifted and simultaneously imagine the impure residue that is left behind. Naimy goes on to introduce an addendum to this epigraph; that ‘the work of the critic is, indeed, sifting, but it is not the sifting of people.’<sup>731</sup> Instead, what the critic needs to sift is ‘what certain people record of ideas, feelings and inclinations [for that is] what we call literature.’<sup>732</sup> This, however, does not make the author redundant in the process of sifting. As we shall see below, in compliance with Belinsky’s approach to authors and his divination of their ideas, Naimy’s principal consideration in literary criticism is to ‘distinguish between the beautiful and the ugly, and between the sound and the corrupt’<sup>733</sup> – anti-essentialist literary aesthetics that are always subject to alteration as Naimy, like Belinsky, does not believe in a framework of fixed criteria for beauty.

For Belinsky, the *idea* was at the heart of his literary criticism. He largely concentrated his attention upon the *form* of the true work of art as the embodiment of the “living and organic body” of its “idea”<sup>734</sup>; this was a manifestation of his reading of German romanticism as depicting the work of art as a living organism was well-used trope in German idealist aesthetics.<sup>735</sup> However the author was always present in Belinsky’s summation of the artistic work, foregrounding the correspondence between his and Naimy’s

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<sup>731</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.13.

<sup>732</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.13.

<sup>733</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.17.

<sup>734</sup> Victor Terras, *Belinskij and Russian Literary Criticism: the heritage of organic aesthetics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1974), p.127.

<sup>735</sup> *Ibid.*

ideas: '*The simplicity of the invention* in real poetry is one of the truest signs of veritable poetry and, besides which, of a veritable and mature talent.'<sup>736</sup>

### **Naimy and Belinsky and the Question of What is Literature?**

The inseparability of work of art from artist (and the artist from an idea of nation) is a theme that both critics developed in their works in order to arrive at a functioning definition of great works of literature. Consider this definition of national literature from Belinsky:

What is literature?

Some say that the literature of a nation comprises the entire scope of all its intellectual activities expressed in letters. Consequently, our literature, for example, would comprise Karamzin's *History* [...] with a pamphlet on *bugs and beetles* [...].

Others under the word literature understand a collection of a number of elegant productions, or, as the French say, *chef d'oeuvres de littérature*. [...]

But there is a third opinion, resembling neither of the two preceding ones, an opinion which claims that literature is the collective body of such artistic literary productions as are the fruit of the free inspiration and concerted (though unco-ordinated) efforts of men, *born for art, living for art alone, and ceasing to exist outside of it*, fully expressing and reproducing in their elegant creations the spirit of the people in whose midst they have been born and educated, whose life they live

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<sup>736</sup> O *russskoi povesti i povestiyakh g. Gogolya*, p.37. Italics in original.

and spirit they breathe, expressing in their creative productions its intimate life to its innermost depths and pulsation.<sup>737</sup>

Here, Belinsky defines literature specifically by conjoining the quality works of inspired literature (which we can presume to be different genres from the pamphlets produced on bugs and beetles) to the dedicated souls who have pledged their lives and careers to the purpose of producing great art. Great works by themselves are not enough, as the second opinion above illustrates, to constitute a great literary nation, for as Belinsky points out, 'is there a language in the world which does not possess a modicum of exemplary works of art, though they be only folk songs?'<sup>738</sup> In order for a nation to truly have a literature, the dedication of the artist to their work, the artists' evocation of the spirit that surrounds them, and the recognition of both of these elements by their compatriots in the readership, are the crucial components that contribute towards the establishment of a national literature.

Naimy understands the points made by Belinsky and harnesses similar sentiments to his own conception of literature. The early part of *al-Ġarbalah* is as much about the writers as it is about the works of literature they produce. Producing excellent literature takes time and the support of a sympathetic literary framework and the ability to understand, on the part of the writer as well as the critic, what constitutes a great work of literature:

There are those amongst the writers and poets who do not distinguish between the literary works which form part of the legacy for future generations, and the works that do not excel in any way; the

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<sup>737</sup> Belinsky, p.7-8 (italics mine).

<sup>738</sup> Ibid.

circle of friends and acquaintances of those kinds of writers and poets is so confined that they never ripen. It is not thus welcome that they should be called a writer or a poet. Likewise, the critic who does not differentiate between the criticised *personality* and the written work is not welcome because he should be amongst the holders of the sieve or the creditors of their debt.<sup>739</sup>

The word *personality* needs to be elucidated here as the point that Naimy is making is that although the writer and their work are two different entities, the devotion of the writer to their work has to be paramount:

Indeed, the personality of the writer or poet is the holiest of holies. He can eat, drink and dress what, when and how he likes. He can choose to live as an angel or as a devil. He puts himself first above all else, apart from the time he takes his pen and writes, or ascends the *minbar* [a type of pulpit in a mosque] and delivers his sermon. Then, presently, he puts down what he has written or said in the form of a book or article in order to read all he wants. In that hour, he is like someone who has peeled away a layer of his personality and shown it to the public, saying: 'There it is, people, the *idea* you inquired after. You have within it a light and a gift, which will embrace you with beautiful and valuable affection.'<sup>740</sup>

Naimy's *fikr* runs parallel to Belinsky's *misl'*, both words conveying the sense of cognitive processes leading to an idea, and both critics put the literary *idea* at the centre of literature, especially great literature. In Russian

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<sup>739</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.14 (italics mine).

<sup>740</sup> *Ibid.* (italics mine).

literary criticism, and again we shall look at this in more detail below, building up critical essays around the ideas of writers was developed in earnest by Belinsky and taken up by socially engaged thinkers such as Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov, and Nikolay Mikhailovsky; the latter of these, Mikhailovsky, was a prominent source for Naimy's essay in *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd* on the subject of Maksim Gorky, onto which we shall progress later. (Naimy delved into Gorky's idea of the victim status of the impoverished and subordinated people of Russia and used Mikhailovsky's essay to demonstrate how his literary texts had affected the readers of Russia.<sup>741</sup>)

Looked at more closely, Naimy's description of the writer or poet in his personality and how it contrasts with his work processes is a brief adjunct to some of Belinsky's comments on the nature of the artist. Naimy is effectively saying that not only may a writer choose to live according to whatever sense of aesthetics or moral framework they prefer to adopt, but also that the process of artistic creation is one that is fundamentally enigmatic, an epiphany that is essentially outside the realm of positivist research.<sup>742</sup> Belinsky normally chooses to use the word *khudozhnik* (artist) instead of writer or poet and concentrates on the artist's intellectual consistency rather than their social behaviour.<sup>743</sup> However, he concurs with Naimy in using the trope of sudden artistic activity that is cloaked in a kind of spiritual obscurity:

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<sup>741</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, pp.80-92.

<sup>742</sup> On this particular subject of literary creativity, Naimy is reiterating the thoughts of Pushkin, who wrote of the arcane, divine inspiration of the poet in such works as *Poka ne trebuet poeta* ('Until [he] calls the poet...', usually translated as 'The Poet') in 1827. Naimy wrote a short article on Pushkin which was included in the collection *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*.

<sup>743</sup> This is particularly true in the case of Gogol, whom Belinsky severely (and famously) criticised for writing *Vibrannie mesta iz perepiski s druz'yami* (Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends) in his published letter to the author of 3 July, 1847 (1948, pp.503-12).

And so the principal, distinctive trait of creativity lies in a certain mysterious clairvoyance, in a certain poetic somnambulism. The artist's creation is still a secret to all, he still has not so much as lifted his pen – and yet already he can see them clearly, already he can count the folds of their dresses, the wrinkles on their brow, furrowed by passion and grief, already he knows them better than you know your father, brother, friend, your mother, sister, the woman you love.<sup>744</sup>

Taking apart his *Literary Reveries* as a complete work in order to seek the underlying argument of Belinsky, Bowman, having described the *Reveries* themselves as having an 'illogical structure and irregular pace [as well as a] brokenness of theme,'<sup>745</sup> posits the notion that all of Belinsky's writings in the *Reveries* point towards the sanctity of the 'idea' in literature, exemplified in these formulae:

Poet  
|  
Nation  
|  
Humanity  
|  
"Eternal Idea"

Just as the "eternal idea" finds particular expression in humanity, so humanity in the nation, and so the nation in the true poet. Thus the theorems that art is the expression of the general life of nature and that

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<sup>744</sup> Quoted in Terras, p.180.

<sup>745</sup> Bowman (1954), p.66.

art is the expression of the inner life of the nation, appear as equally valid statements of the same ideology. The national life is made the vehicle of the “idea in the general life of nature.” As Belinski insists, “every people expresses in itself some phase of the life of humanity.”<sup>746</sup>

The underlying concern of Belinsky’s work, therefore, is a conviction that the poet, or artist, is expressing an intertextual network of ideas that pertain not only to the essence of the nation, but also to humanity in general. The word ‘nation’ in the framework above is essential for, as we mentioned before, a nation only creates its own literature, in Belinsky’s ideas, by promoting a shared interest between the readership of the nation and the artist in expressions of ideas that contribute to the understanding and betterment of all humanity. Naimy found common ground with this theorem of Belinsky in his *al-Ġarbalah* essay, describing literary criticism as a crucial girder in supporting a national literature and ruing the destructive nature of a basic misconception of the primary functions of literary criticism:

What concerned me first of all in making clear this elemental truth [about the nature of writers’ personalities] is that many Arab writers and their readers still view criticism as a blow in the war between critic and criticised.<sup>747</sup>

Being unable to draw this distinction, Naimy continues, results in confusion and unwarranted offence when the critic labels an ode as being ‘trivial’ (*tafiḥ*) and the reader understands it to mean that the critic believes the poet himself to be *tafiḥ*. We can see from this example drawn from Naimy’s work, and from

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<sup>746</sup> Ibid., p.67-8.

<sup>747</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, pp14-5.

that of Belinsky's, that the common premise on which both works are situated is one of a fundamentalist type of criticism. Both Belinsky and Naimy believed that it was necessary to address the roots of the problems in their respective literatures before they could undertake the burdensome task of trying to signpost in which direction their literatures ought to be taken.<sup>748</sup> In this instance, the exact problems were twofold: a misunderstanding of the role of the artist and of the way in which they worked, and a misconception of what constitutes great literature and how to recognise such works.

### **The Role of the Critic in Literary Criticism**

Inherent in the problem of how to recognise great literature is the shared dialectic of Belinsky and Naimy on the superiority of the critic in the literary dynamics, which Naimy articulates later in the same essay on the subject of taste:

While he is behind his workbench, [the critic] becomes a sultan carrying out his own orders, embracing his own ideology, embellished with his own jewellery, and thousands of people derive pleasure from his [good] taste.<sup>749</sup>

There is no doubting the leadership qualities, therefore, that Naimy considered essential to the role of the critic. It was important that the critic was not swayed by public opinion, to be a kind of weather vane for a public's ephemeral tastes, but that they dictated what good taste ought to be. Belinsky would have recognised such a didactic approach (he was, after all, careful to

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<sup>748</sup> As discussed earlier in the second chapter of this thesis, Naimy's essential adherence to the idea of national literatures conflicted with his theosophical belief in the removal of all national boundaries to create a global community: a conflict that Naimy never fully, intellectually, reconciled.

<sup>749</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.17.

differentiate Pushkin from the rest of the sham literature that was being produced in Russia in the early nineteenth century), but he could be very subtle in his didacticism, often using his own thoughts and considerations as demonstrative of the entire nation:

This is why we begin Russian poetry with him [Pushkin] and call him the first Russian poet. That does not at all mean that there were no poets before him, or even none worthy of attention, respect, love, reputation, and praise; it means only that they expressed the gradual efforts of Russian poetry [...]

This is our thought on the development of Russian poetry and Russian literature: its history, in our opinion, is the history of its efforts to pass from artificiality and imitativeness to naturalness and independence, from being bookish to being alive and social.<sup>750</sup>

Although they differ in the terms that they use, the dialectic of sifting through literature renders Naimy's and Belinsky's works theoretically contiguous. While Belinsky argued for the progression of poetry from artificiality to naturalness, Naimy considers a more elemental aesthetic foundation for literature as well as a more moral quality, contrasting in *al-Ġarbalah* both *jamīl* (beautiful) and *qabīḥ* (ugly), and even, as a curious example of *saj'* (rhyming prose) that was a staple of Ottoman-era prose literature, *ṣāliḥ* (righteous) and *tāliḥ* (evil).<sup>751</sup> Locating his definition of *ṣāliḥ* and *jamīl* literary works in the same conceptual framework that set the parameters for Belinsky's division between artificial and imitative on one hand, and natural

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<sup>750</sup> Bowman (1954), p.167.

<sup>751</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, pp15-6.

on the other, Naimy argues for the watermark of good literature to be the test of whether it is well-arranged and valuable:

There are no duties upon the critic other than that of returning matters to their origins and giving them their names in order to give them sufficient clothing [we can think of this as *genre*]. Although the duty of the critic is not confined to close examination, evaluation and good arrangement, he is the creator, progenitor and leader in what is closely examined, evaluated and well-arranged.<sup>752</sup>

Both materially and stylistically, we can see many similarities here between Belinsky and Naimy. When we consider Belinsky's *Literary Reveries*, there is no attempt to disguise the fact that Belinsky believes his taste to be genuinely superior and so refined that the reading public ought to consider his views with especial weight. This is why he can make a statement such as, '*Yuri Miloslavsky* was the first good Russian novel. Though lacking artistic completeness and integrity it displays a remarkable skill in portraying the life of our ancestors,<sup>753</sup> and not expect to be challenged by a largely uninitiated audience. The tone of the remark is as that of a pedagogue instructing an intelligent but uninformed readership of what they need to understand in order to study literature seriously, but also that of a critic who believes that he has barely any serious competitors.

Elsewhere, Belinsky expounds on other areas of Russian literature in order to impress upon the reader his expert background knowledge: 'Who are the geniuses of the *Smirdin* period of literature? They are Messieurs Baron

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<sup>752</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.19.

<sup>753</sup> Belinsky (1948), p.87.

Brambeus, Grech, Kukolnik, Voyeikov, Kalashnikov, Masalsky, Yershov and many others.<sup>754</sup> Reminiscent of Naimy's recitation of names from the classical era, Belinsky also reminds us that his is not a close hermeneutic approach to literature, but one that values the emotional reaction of the reader to great literary works. As Belinsky goes on to say of the *Smirdin* geniuses, 'What can be said of them? I marvel, I am awed, struck dumb!'<sup>755</sup>

Moreover, stylistically, there is a tendency on the part of both authors to combine this emotive expressing with a continuous milling over certain aspects of their criticism in order to reach the kernel of their meaning. Just as Naimy is unafraid to use the same words in contiguous sentences, as in the example above where he employs the same three tri-literal roots in close proximity to each other (the Arabic words for 'close examination,' 'evaluation' and 'good arrangement' are repeated in the succeeding sentence with minor inflections), Belinsky also has a habit of churning over the same word or concept for several hundred words in order to mine the true nature of its meaning. One example of this would be from the essay *The Idea of Art*.

Nature, for example, came about immediately and at the same time *spontaneously*; historical phenomena, on the other hand, such as the origination of tongues and political communities, occurred immediately but by no means *spontaneously*; similarly, the immediacy of phenomena is a basic law, an immutable condition in art, investing it in a sublime and mystic significance; but *spontaneity* is not an essential attribute of art – on the contrary, it is hostile to it and degrading. The

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<sup>754</sup> Belinsky (1948), p.93.

<sup>755</sup> Ibid.

word “immediate” incorporates a much more extensive, profound and sublime notion that the word “*spontaneous*.”<sup>756</sup>

### Qualifications of the Critic

The beginning of the above essay is interesting as Belinsky shows in a footnote his steadfast belief in his own authority concerning the definition of art: ‘This definition appears for the first time in the Russian language, and it will not be met in any Russian works on aesthetics, poetics or the so-called theory of letters.’<sup>757</sup> His adamant confidence in his ideas (something reflected in Naimy) is tempered, however, by a need to convince the reader of his own broad expertise in the fields of literature and philosophy, and so we have references all through the *Literary Reveries*, along with other works, to figures from the intellectual heritages of Great Britain, France and Germany. Naimy is no less eager to prove his own literary credentials in his essays. Alongside more banal references to such poets and philosophers as Imru’ al-Qays and Ibn Rušd, there are more oblique allusions to his reading of classical Arabic literature, such as in the metaphoric explanation he gives on the question of why the critic should be allowed to state what is good and bad literature:

What right does the jeweller have, upon being presented with two pieces of similar-looking metal, to say that this one is gold and the other is copper?<sup>758</sup>

Naimy appears to be invoking here a tradition in Arabic literary criticism that dates back to at least the eighth century, that of employing the metaphor of

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<sup>756</sup> Belinsky (1948), pp.179-80. Italics mine.

<sup>757</sup> Belinsky (1948), p.168.

<sup>758</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.18.

fake and genuine coins to draw an allusion to bad and good literature.<sup>759</sup>

Incidentally, the Arabic word for criticism is etymologically linked to (in fact, the same as) one of the Arabic words for money: *naqd*. While the range of literary criticism has changed much in the intervening centuries, it is striking that Naimy should choose to utilise the image of the jeweller (conceptually, not far away from that of the money-changer in that they both need to determine the value of purportedly precious metals) to bring to the reader's attention the skills needed in order to sift through literature.

Naimy's concept of *al-Ġarbalah* ends with his proclamation that the critic needs to be many things in his appreciation of the arts around him, grasping the nuances of colour in paintings and the different moods in expression, as well as understanding the subtleties in different word-groups and phrases.<sup>760</sup> It is of note that Naimy chooses to end this particular essay, which tacitly acts as a manifesto for the rest of his criticism, with the thesis that owes a great deal of its imagery to Belinsky's thoughts on the idea of art, quoted above:

The act of sifting is both a habitual practice of nature and a habitual practice of humanity, both of which form part of nature.<sup>761</sup>

While the appeal to the natural world forms part of his reading of Belinsky, it is interesting that Naimy should use the word *sunna* to denote 'a habitual practice,' as the word is most commonly associated with the customs of the prophet Muḥammad and reflects the Islamic influence that inevitably formed a part of his world-view.

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<sup>759</sup> Or, as in the case of *al-Awzā'ī*, fabricated or genuine hadiths (Ouyang (1997) p.98).

<sup>760</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.21.

<sup>761</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.22.

### Developing a Relationship with the Reader in *al-Ġirbāl*

Having taken some time to scrutinise the concept of sifting, we should now examine some of the other important notions of literary criticism introduced to the Arab readership by Naimy, which also share their dialectics with some of Belinsky's founding principles. Throughout *al-Ġirbāl* there is a constant awareness of the bigger context surrounding literary criticism, one that was necessitated by the political context surrounding the circumstances of his writing. We have already looked at this in some detail in the second chapter; however, to reiterate we ought to remind ourselves that the first two decades formed a period of considerable turmoil in the Arab world and the wider Arab community found itself in a position where it was necessary to re-negotiate its identity, both because of external pressure from the Great Powers of Western Europe, and on account of a growing self-awareness and understanding of the need to examine their societal norms, leading to radical, influential works by figures such as Qāsim Amīn, Rašīd Riḍā, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn and others.<sup>762</sup> By the time that *al-Ġirbāl* was published in 1923, the Ottoman Empire had collapsed<sup>763</sup> and the inhabitants of Syria and Lebanon were adjusting to life under the French mandate,<sup>764</sup> and culturally the Arab world had witnessed the blossoming of *an-nahḍah*.

In spite of looking at literature through a global lens, Naimy's approach to literary dialectics mirrored Belinsky's in his decision to take an epistolary,

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<sup>762</sup> See Hourani (1983) for an overall account of their effect in the Arab world.

<sup>763</sup> The phrase is used by Haniöĝlu in his account of the late Ottoman Empire (2008).

<sup>764</sup> Although it is debatable to what extent this produced a change in public sympathy towards Arab nationalism of the kind that Naimy obliquely displays in *al-Ġirbāl*. Both Rashid Khalidi, *The Origins of Arab Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), and Philip Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: the Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), argue for a continuity in Arab politics that supersedes foreign intervention.

intimate tone in his essays that directly addressed the reader. The tone is betrayed most evidently by the liberal use of the first person plural in Naimy's writings when he delves into the heart of meaning in literature. From *Mihwar al-adab* (The Axle of Literature), we learn:

Indeed, in all that we do and all that we say and all that we write, we are doing nothing more than scrutinising ourselves. When we looked for God we found ourselves in God, and when we pursued beauty, we were doing nothing more than pursuing ourselves in beauty.<sup>765</sup>

This excerpt is indicative of the bond that Naimy believes exists between the critic and his readership, a personal relationship that will, through its dialogic technique, uncover and elucidate functioning mechanisms in literature. The rest of this paragraph is governed by his use of the first person plural; words such as 'we study,' 'we discover' and 'ourselves' intimate that this is as much of a process of examination and unearthing for Naimy as it is for the reader. In his use of a matrix of intimate, direct correspondence in his criticism, Naimy is borrowing his literary terms from Belinsky. Belinsky's own essays for the literary journals that existed in Russia at the time and with which Belinsky was affiliated, that is, *Teleskop* (The Telescope), *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary) and *Moskovsky nablyudatel'* (Moscow Observer), were written mainly in an informal style that seemed to presuppose a personal relationship between the author and reader. The *Literary Reveries* in particular are symptomatic of this chosen style, being full of witty asides, rhetorical questions, blasé addresses and conversational language, as this short extract demonstrates:

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<sup>765</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.25.

Can we forget Bogdanovich? What fame he enjoyed during his lifetime, how contemporaries admired him, and how some readers today still admire him! What is the reason for this success? Imagine yourself stunned by noisy bombast, surrounded by people talking in monologues about the most commonplace things, and you suddenly meet a man of simple and intelligent speech: would you not greatly admire him?<sup>766</sup>

Rhetorical questions are also present, in fact commonplace, in Naimy's works. Frequently, Naimy asks the reader to consider the ramifications of a question that he has made to be the guiding thesis of his work. By posing the question, Naimy not only asks the reader to follow the thread of the argument, but intimates a tacit contract between reader and writer, as in this example from *al-Maqāyīs al-adabīyyah* (The Literary Standards):

Are there not some styles in literature that do not mature with time, and to which the days do not add beauty and reverence?<sup>767</sup>

Elsewhere, in *ar-Riwāyah at-tamīliyyah al-'arabiyyah* (The Arabic Play), the language is informal and designed to be understood by the lay reader. The following quotation is based on personal emotions and a gut reaction to the performance:

We continue to look at the actor like we look at an "acrobat" and at the actress like a harlot, the theatre like a carousel, and the play like a type of revelry and distraction. Our people have not understood the importance of the dramatic art in their life, because they have never

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<sup>766</sup> Belinsky, p.39. The conversational language is part of the heteroglossia in Belinsky's essays (see ch. 'Discourse in the Novel' (esp. sub-chapter *Heteroglossia in the Novel*) in Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (2004)).

<sup>767</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.72.

looked at plays as scenes of life being played out in front of them, of which they know both the author and the addressee, and they have never seen themselves in the theatre.<sup>768</sup>

In spite of referring to the Arab audience in the third person for the majority of the quotation, the first half, which cites 'our people,' shows how Naimy clearly felt himself to be part of that Arab audience and demonstrates his concerns for the future of Arab theatre. This particular essay was published in *al-Funūn* in February, 1917 (ed.2, no.9), appearing in the same edition as an instalment (the third of five) of Naimy's play, *al-Ābā' wa al-banūn* (Fathers and Sons). As has been noted before, there is a palpable sense that Naimy is having to explain the art of drama to an Arab audience that is entirely unfamiliar with the concept<sup>769</sup> and is therefore having to elucidate the purpose and intricacies of the genre *ab initio*. The intimate tone of Naimy finds an echo in Belinsky's personal communications with the reader on the subject of the theatre:

Who does not love theatre, who does not see in it one of the most vibrant delights of life, whose real heart does not worry about the sweet, timid premonitions of forthcoming pleasure promised through the announcements of the benefit performance of a remarkable artist or of the staging of a production of a great poet?<sup>770</sup>

Belinsky's simple syntax and conversational tone inform the reader that the author is writing as if he were one of them, another interested observer on the

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<sup>768</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.33.

<sup>769</sup> Although, Arab drama had been a recognised genre since 1847, when Marun an-Naqqāš first produced his Moliere-influenced play, *al-Bakīl* (see Badawi (1988)).

<sup>770</sup> Belinsky (1983), p.174. The translation has necessarily been slightly free in order to communicate better the sense of Belinsky's essay.

state of the Moscow Theatre, before moving on to a more detailed thesis on the state of Russian drama in general and comparisons with Shakespeare. Belinsky, however, comes from a tradition that has already been acquainted with the art of theatre for a couple of centuries.<sup>771</sup> His tone, therefore, is one of a biased enthusiast for the theatre, who seeks to find out the problems with the genre and engage in a dialogic discussion with the reader in order to solve the difficulties. Moreover, Naimy was also prone to using Shakespeare as a comparative marker in discussions about literature, as we have already seen in *al-Hubāḥib* and can also find in the essay, *Šiksbīr ḳalīl mutrān*, his literary critique on how Ḳalīl Muṭrān translated Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* into Arabic.<sup>772</sup>

### **Defence of Modern Literature in Naimy's Essays**

Writing about the works of one's fellow, contemporary Arab writers was, in Naimy's view, an essential component in establishing a greater functioning system of modern Arabic literary criticism, and Naimy used *al-Ġirbāl* to exploit that fact. Just as Belinsky operated in his criticism on a proto-nationalist level, emphasising the value of the work of a small group of intellectuals who were attempting to change the outlook of Russian literature, so Naimy structured much of his criticism around the promotion of a small group of authors of Levantine origin. The most obvious manifestation of this phenomenon was the

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<sup>771</sup> Here, we should just note that we intend to mean 'theatre' as a more complete system of production: i.e. having both a recognised repertoire of productions and a number of purpose-built places in the country in which to perform them. As Catriona Kelly notes in her essay, 'The origins of the Russian theatre,' taken from *A History of Russian Theatre* eds. Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (Cambridge: CUP, 1999) p.18: 'The idea of a dramatic repertoire was introduced to Russia in the seventeenth century, along with the literary culture (*literatura* – also a foreign borrowing) with which it is intimately connected.'

<sup>772</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, pp.221-232. Naimy revisited the subject of Ḳalīl Muṭrān's writings in *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, pp. 53-61.

publication of the manifesto of *ar-Rābiṭah al-qalamiyyah* (The Pen League),<sup>773</sup> an association of writers who had communications with the publication *al-Funūn*. Therefore, a number of essays in *al-Ġirbāl* centred on the works of a particular member of *ar-Rābiṭah al-qalamiyyah*, whose works Naimy was keen to promote: Jibrān Ḳalīl Jibrān.<sup>774</sup> Jibrān was Naimy's closest literary ally in New York; their friendship was also an intellectual bond. *As-Sābiq* (The Antecedent) examined Jibrān's latest work after the English translation of his novel, *al-Majnūn* (The Madman), and delved into the philosophical thinking that provided the intellectual structure for so many of his works:

What Jibrān does is brilliant in using the metaphor as a means of transferring his own thoughts. Amongst all styles of elucidation, the metaphor is the most extensive, beautiful and eloquent because it is closest to the intellect. Jibrān showed a faculty in arranging his metaphors similar to his faculty in arranging his free verse. His metaphors, like his poetry, were a picture of living speech.<sup>775</sup>

Naimy was indefatigable in his defence of Ḳalīl Jibrān, as another major essay from *al-Ġirbāl* showed. '*Awāṣif "al-'awāṣif"* (Tempests Surrounding "The Tempests") attacks regressive literature and is overflowing in its praise for Jibrān:

Where are they, the sons of literature? Where are the sons of art amongst us?

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<sup>773</sup> See *Sab'ūn* II, esp. ch. *ar-Rābiṭa*, and Richard Alan Popp, 'Ar-Rābiṭa al-qalamiyya' (Journal of Arabic Literature, vol.32, no.1 (2001).

<sup>774</sup> *As-Sābiq* (The Antecedent), *Ibtisāmāt wa dumū'* (Smiles and Tears) and '*Awāṣif "al-'awāṣif"* (Storms over "The Storms") are all concerned with Jibrān's literary works.

<sup>775</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.189.

Are they the nightingales of the Nile, the blackbirds of Lebanon, or the impressionists of Syria who call themselves 'the silver men'? They are not real artists. Most of them are rumbling drums and bubbles that float on the surface of our literary life. There will remain, however, one race amongst the races in our existence and they are a small group who perceive life through their speech in new embers, and whose hearts burst forth in fiery anger at what they understand around them of the slanders to the kingdom of the pen. Some of them are still in the womb of their birth house, while some of them breathe the air that we inhale and tread the same earth as us. And amongst those, at their vanguard, is the poet of the night; the poet of seclusion; the poet of melancholy; the poet of spiritual wakefulness; the poet of the sea; even the poet of the storms – Jibrān Ḳalīl Jibrān.<sup>776</sup>

Although not a member of *ar-Rābiṭah al-qalamiyyah*, Naimy also wrote *ar-Rihānī fī 'ālam aš-šī'r*, which looked specifically at the poetry collections of Amīn ar-Rihānī (1876-1940) and asked why he had decided to publish *A Chant of Mystics, and Other Poems* (New York: James T. White & Co., 1921), a volume written in English rather than in Arabic.<sup>777</sup> The manner in which Naimy questions the wisdom of ar-Rihānī in publishing a volume of poetry in English reminds us of the way in which Belinsky treated contemporary Russian authors. There was a conscious effort in both critics to construct a chronological narrative in the criticised authors and a kind of teleological purpose to their collection of works. Belinsky did not study Pushkin and

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<sup>776</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.249.

<sup>777</sup> Rihānī was not a member of the group for two reasons: he was away from New York at its inception, and the mutual animosity between him and Jibrān had reached a peak around the same time (*Sab'ūn* II, p.233.).

Gogol, for instance, in his essays in terms of a single work, but in terms of their entire oeuvre which stretched back to their first publication.<sup>778</sup> Only through following this type of analysis would Belinsky get through to the underlying *ideas* that connected their works. In this essay, Naimy shows clear indications of doing the same and the allusion is made more pertinent by ar-Rīhānī being a close friend and colleague of Naimy, recalling the same sort of relationship that Belinsky had with Gogol:

I asked myself after I had read ar-Rīhānī's new collection whether ar-Rīhānī the poet had become a prose writer, and in which styles of expression was he the most evocative? I returned in my ruminations to *al-Rīhāniyyāt*, *The Book of Kalīd*, *The Lily of al-Ġaur*, *Outside the Harem*, *The Descent of Bolshevism*, and finally to *al-Luzūmiyyāt*, then to *A Chant of Mystics*. I ran across his articles, novels and poetry and found that he had ripened more in the articles than in his novels and poetry as his intellectual thought outweighed his sentiment.<sup>779</sup>

We can read in Naimy's, albeit qualified, support for the works of ar-Rīhānī the same promotion of modern literary movement Belinsky was making in his endorsement of Gogol, Pushkin and others. Both critics make use of their intellectual awareness in building an cohesive picture of the diachronic development of literature, and can draw contrasts between the literary expressions of different generations. In *al-Ġirbāl*, Naimy drew lines between poets of different generations, who acted as co-ordinates on a map of Arabic literary progression. *Ad-Durrat aš-šawqiyyah* (The Pearl Šauqī) makes a

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<sup>778</sup> Belinsky's 'Articles on the Works of Aleksandr Pushkin' run to eleven volumes.

<sup>779</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, pp.180-1.

critical examination of the Egyptian poet who returned from exile to Egypt in 1920, the same year that Naimy wrote the aforementioned essay. Although only twenty years older than Naimy, Šauqī seems, intellectually, to belong to a different era – one that lauded poets openly, employed them to write odes for the khedive and did not yet recognise the modern trends that were starting to be imported from the western tradition. Like Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm, Ahmad Šauqī is one of the final neo-classicists in Arabic poetry and represents the end of a tradition before other poets began to experiment with free verse and poetry in prose. For Naimy, Šauqī's past problematises his poetry, although he is restrained in his criticism of the poet in comparison to his contemporary Egyptian critic, al-'Aqqād, who accused Šauqī of only receiving his accolade *amīr aš-šū'arā'* (prince of poets) on account of his connections with royal authority.<sup>780</sup> Nevertheless, Naimy attacks Šauqī's poetry on account of its lack of an underlying *idea*, the very thing that Belinsky championed in his own criticism of Russian writers. For Naimy, like al-'Aqqād, Šauqī's poetry suffers from a dearth of integrity, and it is questionable whether it ought to be described as real poetry at all<sup>781</sup>:

The poetry that we may call real poetry is undying and eternal on the earth, a joy that stirs sentiments in their hearts, and provokes thoughts in their heads. Is Šauqī's ode an example of this type of poetry? The pearls of poetry do not let go of the vicissitudes of fate and time does

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<sup>780</sup> See David Semah, *Four Egyptian Literary Critics* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp.19-25.

<sup>781</sup> This position is, naturally, not without its formidable critics. See especially Salma Khadra Jayyusi, who defends Ahmad Šauqī (and castigates Naimy for his insufficient knowledge of classical Arab poets) in her *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

not rob them of their splendour. Is Šauqī's "pearl" one of these pearls, or is it just a glistening sea shell? I leave it to the reader to decide.<sup>782</sup>

In spite of their common language and the fact that they were writing about the same poet, there seems to be more in common in the aesthetics of Naimy with Belinsky than there do between Naimy and al-'Aqqād, whose criticism of Šauqī ventures into the area of personal attacks. While Naimy and Belinsky concentrated on larger social movements and the reflection of the country's socio-political problems through its literature, al-'Aqqād was concerned with the particular and the personal, directing his criticism towards the personality and mentality of the poets.<sup>783</sup> There is more of a sense of the linear progression of literature in Naimy's and Belinsky's works that informs the reader of a history for the texts and the idea that the writers are moving towards a better future for both the country and for its literature, than in al-'Aqqād's largely synchronic approach that examines the personalities of poets outside the context of the socio-political situations that informed their writings.

The Šauqī and Muṭrān essays, alongside a piece on the literary heritage of the al-Bustānī family that was published in *al-Funūn* but does not appear in the final collection of *al-Ġirbāl*,<sup>784</sup> are both saturated with the same kinds of tropes, aims and aesthetics that are abound in both Belinsky's works, and in the works of the critics that come after him. We have the constant (tacit) appeal to the current political situation in the Arab world and the idea that the

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<sup>782</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.169.

<sup>783</sup> Semah (1974), p.22: '[al-'Aqqād] accuses Šauqī of having used his position in the royal palace in order to attain popular fame by means of blackmail and intrigue.'

<sup>784</sup> 'Fi 'ālam at-ta'lif: al-Bustānī' (*al-Funūn* 3, no.6 (June 1918)).

absence of a positive direction in the past has led to the crisis that either Russia or the Arab world is experiencing in its literature at the moment. Representative of this stance towards the rigid conservatism of the Arab world apparent in its literature are what Naimy describes as *Naqīq aḍ-ḍafādi'* (The Croaking of Frogs).

Taking the title from a poem by Nasīb 'Arīḍa,<sup>785</sup> Naimy makes a distinction between the *nusūr* (eagles)<sup>786</sup> of literature, who soar above the land, searching for new ways to express themselves, and the frogs, who are defined by their habitat: *mustanqa'* (swamps).<sup>787</sup> Using some of the tropes that would appear in some of his later essays, such as the division between *baṣr* and *baṣīrah* that would form an important aspect of his *al-Bayādir* essays,<sup>788</sup> Naimy typifies his frogs by being part of a system of literature that had existed for a thousand years and is unable to envisage any changes to their tradition, one that appoints an *adīb* to speak on their behalf and employ only the words that have always been used.<sup>789</sup> Their attitude towards innovation is characterised by this quotation:

[T]hey cry with one voice: "Croak! Croak! Croak!" And the meaning of this cry is: "Quick! Quick! Let's gather up what is found from the seeds of this corruption and burn it in the fire."<sup>790</sup>

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<sup>785</sup> Naimy states that the title is taken from an unpublished (at the time) *diwān* called *al-Arwāḥ al-ḥā'irah* (The Perplexed Souls): *al-Ġirbāl*, p.97 (*al-Arwāḥ al-ḥā'irah* was later published in New York in 1946).

<sup>786</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.98.

<sup>787</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.97.

<sup>788</sup> See ch. 'Religion.'

<sup>789</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, pp.101-2.

<sup>790</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.100.

The Belinsky-fuelled struggle against conservatism was also plainly evident in one of Naimy's most famous essays, *aš-Šīr wa-š-šā'ir* (Poetry and the Poet), where Naimy called for a new definition of the poet in human existence:

The poet is a prophet, philosopher, painter, musician and priest. A prophet because he sees with his eyes the spiritual that humanity cannot see. A painter because he has the power to depict what he sees and hears of models of beauty in the forms of words. A musician because he can hear a harmony of voices where we can hear nothing but a cacophony. [...] Finally, the poet is a priest because he serves truth and beauty.<sup>791</sup>

This prescription of qualities to be found in the poet is striking for its similarity to another of Naimy's essays where he set out an agenda for literature. In *al-Maqāyis al-adabiyyah* (Literary Standards), Naimy provides a point by point manifesto for what he thought should be the essential values of good literature. Firstly, literature ought to reflect all the emotions that 'befall' humanity, such as hope and despair. Secondly, we need a light to show us the way and that light must be the light of truth. Thirdly, we need to have beauty in everything. Fourthly, we need music.<sup>792</sup>

However, *aš-Šīr wa-š-šā'ir* also saw Naimy delve into more philosophical aspects of literature, such as the question of how representation in an artistic work is a specific type of creation:

It is not an illusion or imagination but an experienced reality. You have not created the hill, the wood, the sea, the sun, the sky or the

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<sup>791</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.91.

<sup>792</sup> *Ibid.*, p.74.

stream. You saw all of it and felt its essence. But then you assembled it, evaluated it, discarded certain bits and selected the vital aspects, then composed all that you had chosen in a knowledgeable fashion and the result was a picture painted by your imagination.<sup>793</sup>

These philosophical ruminations not only echoed Belinsky, 'a landscape created on the canvas of a talented artist is better than any picturesque view in nature. But why is this? Because it contains nothing by chance and nothing superfluous,'<sup>794</sup> but also anticipate the works of Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov, whose texts informed Naimy's later collection of essays, *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*.

### **Other Significant Russian Voices Dialogizing with Naimy's Criticism**

Although lacking the inherent theoretical and intellectual unity of *al-Ġirbāl*, *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd* (In the New Sieve) demonstrates a wider range of Naimy's reading of Russian literature and indicates the presence of other Russian critics alongside the voice of Belinsky which had been so consistent in *al-Ġirbāl*. Although necessarily disjointed stylistically on account of the essays and letters having been produced over a timescale that was vast in comparison with *al-Ġirbāl* (the earliest essay dates from 1946, the latest letter from the year of its first publication, 1973), there is still a consistency of thought behind *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd* that shows Naimy's more detailed comprehension of Russian literary criticism. The mood of the collection is

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<sup>793</sup> Ibid., p.88.

<sup>794</sup> Belinsky, 'Stikhotvoreniya M. Lermontova' (trans. Thomson), quoted in Imanguliyeva (2008).

largely reflective yet not sentimental, as Naimy thinks back to the authors who shaped his literary career, particularly those he read while at Poltava.<sup>795</sup>

At the time of writing, Naimy had reached a point in his life where he seems to have become resolved to a future spent humbly in Lebanon, rather than in the maelstrom of New York.<sup>796</sup> Acutely aware of the absence in his life of his greatest literary comrade, Jibrān (who had died in 1931), and of the end of the excitement of *al-Funūn, Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd* shows an author who was now more accustomed to looking back rather than forward – the consequence of what Nadeem Naimy calls his ‘cuckoo clock retirement’<sup>797</sup> from New York and self-imposed seclusion in Baskinta. Elements, however, of *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd* show a more mature understanding of the works of two other literary critics Naimy would have been aware of from his time in Poltava: Nikolai Chernyshevsky<sup>798</sup> and Nikolai Dobrolyubov<sup>799</sup>, who adopted Belinsky’s central criteria and theories and adapted them to their new socio-political circumstances.<sup>800</sup>

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<sup>795</sup> Of especial interest because it reflects his specialist knowledge, although it is not strictly relevant to this chapter, is Naimy’s essay on the poet, Taras Shevchenko. Despite being feted in the former Soviet Union and his native Ukraine, he remains largely unknown in the west.

<sup>796</sup> See chs. ‘Religion’ and ‘Politics’ for Naimy’s views on New York.

<sup>797</sup> N. Naimy (1967), p.223.

<sup>798</sup> Chernyshevsky was absorbing many ideas while at St Petersburg University, including those of Belinsky and Alexander Herzen (see A. A. Demchenko, ‘Nikolai Chernyshevsky v rossiskoi pamyati i kritike’ from V. N. Podgorbunskikh (ed.), *N. G. Chernyshevsky: pro et contra* (Saint Petersburg: Russkoi khristianskoi gumanitarnoi akademii, 2008), p.12, and Andrew M. Drozd, *Chernyshevskii’s What Is to Be Done?: A Reevaluation* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

<sup>799</sup> Dobrolyubov’s ‘realist criticism’ owed a great deal to his reading of Belinsky (see G. G. Elizavetina (ed.), *N. A. Dobrolyubov i russkaya literaturnaya kritika* (Moscow: «Nauka», 1988) and G. G. Elizavetina, *N. A. Dobrolyubov i literaturny protsess evo vremeni* (Moscow: «Nauka», 1989). Certain tropes used in Dobrolyubov’s essays, for instance, *Luch v temnom tsarstve* (1860; A Ray of Light in a Dark Kingdom) resonate with the critical works of Naimy.

<sup>800</sup> Belinsky, Dobrolyubov and Chernyshevsky have been considered by some critics to be a kind of triumvirate of radical Russian literary criticism. ‘Belinsky begat Chernyshevsky, Chernyshevsky begat Dobrolyubov,’ quoted in Robert H. Stacy, *Russian Literary Criticism: a short history* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1974), p.63. See also Ralph Matlaw (ed.), *Belinsky, Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov: Selected Criticism* (New York: Dutton, 1962) and Nikolai Aleksandrovich Glagolev, *Problemi istorii rysskoi demokraticheskoi kritiki* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskovo Universiteta, 1966).

To contextualise these post-Belinsky authors, we need to say firstly that the social climate in the mid-nineteenth century of re-examining the fabric and construction of Russian society (after the failure to mount a revolution in Russia in 1848) was pivotal to their *Weltanschauung* and instructed the dialectics of their literary texts during the nineteenth century.<sup>801</sup> Noted in an essay by Isaiah Berlin, the events of 1848 convinced the new critics of essential intolerability of the current situation:

But the effect which the failure of 1848 had had on the stronger natures among the younger Russian radicals was to convince them firmly that no real accommodation with the Tsar's government was possible – with the result that during the Crimean War, a good many of the leading intellectuals were close to being defeatist: and this was by no means confined to the radicals and revolutionaries. [...] [A]theists and champions of western scientific ideas like Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov and Pisarev [...] became increasingly absorbed in the specific national and social problems of Russia and, in particular, in the problem of the peasant – his ignorance, his misery, the forms of his social life, their historical origins, their economic future.<sup>802</sup>

Berlin depicts the era immediately following the anti-climax and disappointment of 1848 as one in which radicals stuck to the ideals cemented in the fervour leading up to the monumental year, but became more reactionary, forthright and uncompromising in their approach towards state institutions:

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<sup>801</sup> It is interesting to speculate whether there is a sense of post-revolutionary disappointment present in Naimy's writings also, although this is a subject for another study.

<sup>802</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'Russia and 1848' (The Slavonic and East European Review, Vol. 26, No. 67, Apr., 1948).

“The people feel the need of potatoes, but none whatever of a constitution – that is desired only by educated townspeople who are quite powerless,” wrote Belinsky to his friends in 1846. [Quoted by F. Dan, *Proiskhozhdeniye Bolshevizma*, New York, 1946, pp.36-38.] And this was echoed ten years later by Chernyshevsky in a characteristic hyperbole: “There is no European country in which the vast majority of the people is not absolutely indifferent to the rights which are the object of concern only to the liberals.”<sup>803</sup>

Indeed, as other commentators<sup>804</sup> have pointed out, the essential nature of Russian literary criticism in the nineteenth century (and as we have seen with many of Belinsky’s works) goes beyond the art of literature *sui generis* and is rooted in the wider implications of society and politics (and we would do well to remember here Jameson’s assertion, as quoted in the Politics chapter, that all texts are in the final analysis political):

Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828 – 89), considered the head of the critics of the 1860s who made criticism almost totally a weapon in the struggle against Tsarism and for the emancipation of the serfs, asserted that criticism in Russia has a much wider function than in the West. “With us literature constitutes the whole of the intellectual life of the nation.”<sup>805</sup>

The inherent political quality of the criticism invariably directs us towards Naimy’s experiences in Poltava. In terms of the aesthetics that the new radical

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<sup>803</sup> Ibid.

<sup>804</sup> Such as Berlin, Terras and A. Lavretskii (*Belinskiĭ, Chernyshevskii, Dobrolŭbov v bor’be za realism* (Moscow: Khudozh. Lit, 1968)).

<sup>805</sup> René Wellek, ‘The Essential Characteristics of Russian Literary Criticism’ (Comparative Literature Studies, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1992).

critics came to adopt in their literary criticism, there was a discontinuity between them and Belinsky (and indeed Naimy) in spite of their shared political outlook. In Wellek's words:

[T]he so-called Radical critics of the sixties, Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov and Pisarev, were [Belinsky's] avowed disciples but actually differed sharply from him in their allegiance to deterministic materialism and in their literary theory by a resolute rejection of any aesthetic state or function. Their concern was with content only: they reverted to didacticism.<sup>806</sup>

(Dmitri Ivanovich Pisarev (1840-68) is more often associated by western critics singularly with nihilism than the other two critics,<sup>807</sup> who tend to be examined in the light of radical criticism in general, rather than constraining them solely to nihilism. (Although Dobrolyubov and Chernyshevsky have also been described themselves as nihilists, too.)<sup>808</sup> Owing to the fact that Pisarev's radical views mostly coincided with those of his senior, Chernyshevsky (according to Barghoorn, 'one is justified in viewing Pisarev as the most effective exponent and populariser of the philosophic aspects of Chernyshevsky's *Weltanschauung*'<sup>809</sup>), I have taken the decision to look more closely at Dobrolyubov and Chernyshevsky, rather than Pisarev, for fear of too much duplication in sentiments.)

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<sup>806</sup> Ibid.

<sup>807</sup> See Armand Coquart, *Dmitri Pisarev (1840-1868) et l'idéologie du nihilisme russe* (Paris : Institut d'études slaves de l'Université de Paris, 1946), Peter C. Pozefsky, *The nihilist imagination : Dmitrii Pisarev and the cultural origins of Russian radicalism (1860-1868)* (New York : Peter Lang, 2003) for two examples.

<sup>808</sup> See Frederick C. Barghoorn, 'D. I. Pisarev: A Representative of Russian Nihilism' (The Review of Politics, Vol. 10, No. 2, Apr., 1948).

<sup>809</sup> Ibid.

### Naimy's Social Criticism and its Interaction with Russian Writers

Reading Naimy's essays from *al-Ġirbāl*, we can see an aesthetic fissure between Naimy's literary ideals and those of the post-Belinsky Radicals. However, if elements of deterministic materialism are largely absent from Naimy's early literary essays, which are concerned more with spirituality than materialism, there are pointers towards such a philosophical system and didacticism in some of what we might call his social criticism essays that he wrote after *al-Ġirbāl*.<sup>810</sup> Deterministic and didactic aspects, along with a tendency to view literature within a more social framework, are also evident in Naimy's later collection of critical essays, *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, such as in his essay on Pushkin where he communicates aspects of the poet's revolutionary activity with which his Arab readership may be unfamiliar:

While in Bessarabia, Pushkin associated with some notable groups, the most important of which were the 'Decembrists.' The governor [of Bessarabia] became fed up with him [Pushkin] and went to Petersburg to request his withdrawal as 'on account of the praise, he almost believes himself to be in the position of a writer of some importance, whereas he is nothing but an imitator of Byron who is not actually worthy of imitating him at all.'<sup>811</sup>

We can compare this social awareness with Dobrolyubov's most famous essay, his critical text on Goncharov's novel *Oblomov*, *Shto takoe*

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<sup>810</sup> I have in mind here essays such as *Ṣannīn wa-d-dūlār* (from *Zād al-mī'ād*) and *Risāla al-'ālam al-'arabī* (from *Ṣaut al-'ālam*).

<sup>811</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, p.71.

*oblomovshchina*? (What is Oblomovism?). We can see that the critic concentrates on the effect of the novel upon the wider Russian public and what it means from a socio-political view of the state of the country. The beginning sentence of the essay is instructive in this respect: 'Our public waited for Mr. Goncharov's novel for ten years.'<sup>812</sup> However, Dobrolyubov goes on to be more explicit in the connection between art and life:

[*Oblomov*] reflects Russian life; in it there appears before us the living contemporary Russian type presented with relentless severity and truth; it reflects the new word of our social development, pronounced clearly and firmly without despair and without puerile hopes, but in full consciousness of the truth. This word is – *Oblomovshchina*; it is the key to the riddle of many of the phenomena of Russian life, and it lends Goncharov's novel far greater social significance than all our exposure novels possess. In the *Oblomov* type, and in all this *Oblomovshchina*, we see something more than a successful production by the hand of a strong talent; we see a product of Russian life, a sign of the times.<sup>813</sup>

The opening essays from *Fi al-ġirbāl al-jadīd* reflect the kind of social awareness that Dobrolyubov displayed in the above essay. Naimy's essay on Gorky, in particular, that focuses on his play *Na dnye* (The Lower Depths) is charged with the same type of contextual dimensions that motivate Dobrolyubov. Here, in Naimy's short description of Gorky's life and works and

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<sup>812</sup> N. A. Dobrolyubov, *Selected Philosophical Essays*, trans. J. Fineberg (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1948), p.174.

<sup>813</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.181-2.

of how Gorky came into the world, we can read several allusions to Naimy's own literary works and general ethos towards literature:

There was no eulogy to the incumbent of the Romanov throne, whose throne shook mightily underneath him. The people of Russia, from the east to the west, did not receive the news that one day this boy would, without asking for permission, enter their hearts and thoughts. And he [Gorky] did arouse their indignation at the ignorance, darkness, despotism and exploitation.<sup>814</sup>

As is the common case with articles in Arab journals about Gorky, Naimy makes a great deal of the writer's support for the lower social classes.<sup>815</sup>

Naimy points out that Gorky, rather like Tolstoy, not only found himself the comrade of the peasant, but dwelt amongst the 'homeless and the ostracized.'<sup>816</sup> The socio-political slant of the essay is a significant development from Naimy's essays in *al-Ġirbāl* and appears to show the evidence of wider reading, especially of Russian literary criticism.

Everywhere through the essay there are the signifiers of a more autobiographical approach to the writer's work that was not apparent in *al-Ġirbāl*. Naimy now turns to treating Gorky as not only a writer, but as a personality with whom he clearly believes, reading the sub-text, that he has a great deal in common.<sup>817</sup> The observation that Gorky felt ostracised by

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<sup>814</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, p.80.

<sup>815</sup> In *an-Nafā'is al-'aṣriyyah* (6/VII, 1919), Baydas concentrated on Gorky's support for the working classes, quoting him as writing, 'For whom is the future? It belongs to those who put their trust and faith in work.'

<sup>816</sup> *Fī al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, p.82.

<sup>817</sup> Naimy was at the time writing occasional articles for *aṭ-Ṭarīq* (a socialist-leaning Arab journal in Beirut) The fact that his essays stress the egalitarian qualities of Pushkin, Tolstoy and Gorky indicates his political sympathies.

organised education, having failed to gain entrance to the University of Kazan (of which Tolstoy, one of Gorky's literary heroes, was an alumnus) may have been highlighted by Naimy on account of his own experiences at Poltava, as indicated in the introduction. Furthermore, Gorky's appetite for experiencing everything that time, money and bureaucracy allowed for, and his consequent travels around the Russian Empire in his attendance of what Naimy, somewhat predictably, describes as the 'university of life,' bear a lot of resemblances to Naimy's own final reasoning for abandoning formal education.<sup>818</sup>

It is in his critique of Gorky's *Na dne* that Naimy shows the most obvious signs of his greater awareness of the traditions of post-Belinsky Russian literary criticism. In understanding the greater social significance of the play and thus aligning himself with the ideas expressed by Dobrolyubov in *Shto takoe oblomovshchina?*, Naimy cites the critic, Nikolai Mikhailovsky,<sup>819</sup> and his reaction to first seeing the play:

I arrived at the moment of a dreadful realisation that there were doubts about the establishment which trampled upon people, sent them to labour camps and mutilated their souls.<sup>820</sup>

Aside from Naimy's impressive knowledge of Russian critics outside of the more usual and expected small circle of Russian critics that only, perhaps, a specialist may expect themselves to know, Naimy's essay is saturated with

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<sup>818</sup> *Sab'un* I, pp.403-26.

<sup>819</sup> Nikolai Mikhailovsky himself was a member of the wider, politically aware group of critics and journalists who were associated with the new radical criticism group of the 1860s in Russia, if only by virtue of their contemporaneity and roughly similar social outlook. Mikhailovsky is more associated with the defence of idealistic socialism in the nineteenth century (see Michał Bohun and Guy R. Torr, 'Nikolai Mikhailovskii and Konstantin Leont'ev. On the Political Implication of Herbert Spencer's Sociology' (Studies in East European Thought, Vol. 54, No. 1/2, Mar., 2002).

<sup>820</sup> *Fi al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, p.83.

words that reflect a greater sense of the turmoil present in the world – a tone that he had heavily subdued and tried to counterweigh during the writing of *al-Bayādir* during the Second World War. Consequently, there is frequent usage of the word *ṣamīm* (core) to mean the internal essence of human life – that is to say, Gorky is attempting to write a play that penetrates deeply into the core of the human state. And then surrounding this concept is the violent imagery of the text. Hence, we see words such as *ṣā'iqā* (thunderbolt) and *zilzāl* (earthquake), which add to the general idea of a social maelstrom, one brought on by the inherent inequality of the Russian society, and by inference Arab / Lebanese society, of the type that Chernyshevsky would have recognised in 1860s Russia and which he addressed in *Shto delat'?*.

It is Naimy's detailed (even if restricted in terms of trends and perspective) knowledge of Russian literature and criticism that strikes the reader of *Fī al-ḡirbāl al-jadīd*. To take as another instance, we can look at his essay on Tolstoy at the start of the collection, *'Imlaq ar-rūḥ wa al-qalam* (A Colossus of the Soul and of the Pen), in which Naimy deals with the assertion that Tolstoy's life received a new impetus after the enthronement of Alexander II, the circumstances surrounding his authorship of *War and Peace*, and his relationship with the fundamentalist Christian sect, the Doukhobours.

Naimy takes a deterministic view of Tolstoy's life that seems somehow out of keeping with his own holistic, theosophical view of life in which he can remain untainted by external events. The starting segment of the essay looks at Tolstoy during the years he spent in St Petersburg and is abound with the ideas that would have been the stuff of the new radicals, such as

Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov.<sup>821</sup> Environment is the key shaper of Tolstoy's life and fiction in the same way that Oblomov was tied to his social situation and the environmental factors that kept him captive on his sofa, or the kind of environmental determinism expounded by Vera Pavlovna in Chernyshevsky's *Shto delat'?* Dealing with this factor, Naimy uses words such as *yufsidu* (corrupting), *ṭāhāttuk* (licentiousness) and *tanāquḍ* (conflict) to imply the negative impact that the city had on Tolstoy. After the enthronement of Alexander II and Tolstoy's retreat to his childhood home of Yasnaya Polyana, we see words like *iṣlāḥ* (restoration) and *tarbiyah* (education (i.e. referring to the education of the serfs on his estate)) dominating the text.<sup>822</sup>

Once again, however, it is not merely the evidence of a more socially and environmentally deterministic criticism that implies the presence of the Russian radicals of the 1860s in Naimy's reading, but also the overt references to Russian critics that only a specialist taking an interest in the history of Russian literary criticism would be likely to know about. It is to Naimy's credit that he mentions the Russian critic (and correspondent of Tolstoy), Nikolai Strakhov, in assessing the impact of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* and claims that Strakhov 'discovered invaluable artistic treasures therein.'<sup>823</sup> Strakhov, although possibly familiar to someone with a

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<sup>821</sup> Also known as 'young radicals' and 'revolutionary democrats' (in Soviet terminology), (see Richard Freeborn, 'The nineteenth century: the age of realism, 1855–80,' from Charles A. Moser (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992)).

<sup>822</sup> This epiphany-style reading of Tolstoy's life and the idea that his return to Yasnaya Polyana heralded a complete change in character has been questioned by critics since it became part of the folklore surrounding the man that Naimy cites. As Rene Fueloep-Miller writes in 'Tolstoy the Apostolic Crusader' (*The Russian Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Apr., 1960), '[Tolstoy's] conversion was not a sudden one.' G. M. Hamburg's essay, 'Tolstoy's Spirituality,' for *Anniversary Essays on Tolstoy*, Donna Tussing Orwin (ed.) (Cambridge: CUP, 2010) gives a more complex assessment of what was for Tolstoy an extremely complicated process. We ought to remember, of course, that Naimy did not have access to the wealth of scholarship on the subject that has since been published.

<sup>823</sup> *Fi al-ḡirbāl al-jadīd*, p.8.

keen interest in Tolstoy, is not an especially celebrated name in the West and Naimy would almost certainly have to read Russian sources in order to familiarise himself with his works.<sup>824</sup> It is, thus, evidence of the detailed dialogue between Naimy and Russian literature in his literary criticism.

## Conclusion

The reasons for the dialogue between Naimy and Russian criticism are not purely textual, as we have seen, but arise out of a contextual atmosphere that helps to explain not only the correlation in poetics between the criticism of Naimy and that of Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, Chernyshevsky, et al, but also the possible social and political goals of both the Russian and Arab communities, which were coming more to terms with the literary ideas of critics who had for so long been kept underground by the imperial censors of their day. As we have seen in the chapters pertaining to religion and politics, the similarities in philosophical ideas revolving around the societies of both Naimy and his Russian literary idols are striking and informative, leading us to the assertion that Naimy must have imagined that Belinsky was reflecting a society that was not wholly unlike his own, or the greater Arab world. These political ideas fed into Naimy's criticism and were borne out largely by his monumental work, *al-Ġirbāl*.

These political aspects of nineteenth-century Russian literary criticism emphasise its specificity and characterise the dialogue that Naimy's *al-Ġirbāl*

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<sup>824</sup> Nikolai Nikolaevich Strakhov (1828-96) wrote philosophical and literary essays on a number of subjects close to Naimy's world-view, such as Tolstoy, Eastern religions, belief in Russia and the struggle with the West. Coincidentally, he was also a seminarist and pursued a hermit-like existence during his final decades (see Linda Gerstein, *Nikolai Strakhov* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) and N. Strakhov, *Bor'ba s zapadom v nashei literature*, 3 vols. (The Hague: Mouton, 1969)).

engaged in between it and the works of Belinsky, et al. Belinsky's (and Dobrolyubov's and Chernyshevsky's) willingness and ability to state how literature ought to proceed and consider itself if it is to adapt and evolve was an essential part of his intellectual leadership. In order for Belinsky to do this, the critic had to be dogmatic:

Belinsky was at all times a critic with an ideology and with an aesthetic theory. He persistently conveyed both to his readers, and they became established in Russian literature as almost universally accepted axioms.<sup>825</sup>

He also had to be biased:

Belinsky's writings are wholly and consciously partisan. He explicitly condemned ideological indifference and in practice much preferred an outspoken opponent with whom he could engage in a freewheeling debate.<sup>826</sup>

But above all, he had to be direct and clear:

The ideas that Belinsky advocated were simple and practical enough: progress towards a more enlightened, more just, and better educated society; a society governed by ideals rather than by crassly materialistic concerns; a distinctly Russian culture, led by a socially conscious and progressive literature. Belinsky was a great optimist. He believed that Russia and her literature had made great strides in the right direction in his own lifetime.<sup>827</sup>

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<sup>825</sup> Deborah A. Martinsen, (ed.), *Literary Journals in Imperial Russia* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997); Terras, Victor, 'Belinsky the journalist and Russian literature,' p.120.

<sup>826</sup> *Ibid.*, p.124.

<sup>827</sup> *Ibid.*, p.125.

The setting out of such an agenda reminds the reader of Chernyshevsky's *Shto delat'* (What is to be Done?). This revolutionary novel gathered in popularity in the beginning of the twentieth century, when radical agendas dominated the political arena and Russia was poised on the brink of a fundamental, social overhaul. Research has shown, however, that Chernyshevsky was similarly interested in and impressed by the United States of America for its progressive social institutions in the north of the country. (The south he lambasted for its attitude towards slavery and resistance to democracy.)<sup>828</sup> The past interest of Chernyshevsky in Naimy's home country at the time of writing *al-Ġirbāl* was, in all probability, not lost on him, as he saw his spiritual home country, Lebanon, and by extension the entire Arab world, sat on the precipice of sweeping social and political changes without a proper literature to reflect the times. Naimy dictated the methods and proposals for Arabic literature in his essays; Chernyshevsky (writing at a time when Russian literature was flourishing) turned his attention through the medium of fiction to the social problems that anticipated his novel. In the words of Michael R. Katz and William G. Wagner:

The novel's extraordinary impact, however, derived chiefly from the solutions it proposed for Russia's social ills and for the problems that agitated the intelligentsia from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.<sup>829</sup>

All of which is a world away from the kind of literary criticism by such a figure as T.S. Eliot (who, being born in 1888, was as close a contemporary of Naimy as we can imagine), whose adherence to the formalist creed of *New*

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<sup>828</sup> David Hecht, 'Chernyshevsky and American Influence on Russia' (Science & Society, Vol. 9, No. 4, Fall, 1945).

<sup>829</sup> Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What is to Be Done?* eds. Michael R. Katz and William G. Wagner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), p.1.

*Criticism*, maintaining the self-referentiality of works of art, prioritised the diachronic evolution of literary texts outside their contextual determinants. When we read, for instance, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*<sup>830</sup> our intellectual coordinates are drawn towards Aristotlean *Poetics*<sup>831</sup>; reading Naimy, on the other hand, instantly reminds us more of Russian social criticism in the essays of *Fi al-ġirbāl al-jadīd*, and specifically of Belinsky's emotional responses to literature in *al-Ġirbāl*. At this point, I think it would be fair to point out that both Belinsky's and Naimy's criticism can seem contradictory and confused at times as they expressed their gut reactions to what they deemed 'good' and 'bad' literature purely in terms of what seemed to articulate the 'soul' or 'spirit' of their nations. Their achievements for their respective literatures are still tremendous, but they are not based, unlike the works of Eliot, on a carefully defined set of aesthetics.

One solution for Arabic literature that was posited by Naimy, and which finds a legitimate precursor in his dialogue with Russian social criticism, and especially with Belinsky's German Romanticism-influenced literary criticism, is the importance of translation to the foundation of a substantial, indigenous tradition of literature. Many of Belinsky's literary references point to western traditions; his gold standards for poetry and prose in his essays commonly include such figures Byron, Voltaire and Goethe. Belinsky's essays on drama and theatre inevitably raise Shakespeare onto a pedestal at which Russian drama can only gaze in wonder. But Belinsky does not see this as necessarily a damaging process to Russian literature, particularly as, like Naimy and

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<sup>830</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964).

<sup>831</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* (London: Penguin, 1996).

Arabic literature, he did not view Russia as being part of the west but as a separate, observing entity. On the contrary, contact with western traditions made during Catherine II's reign (1762-96) meant that 'a brighter page was opened in the life of the Russian nation.'<sup>832</sup>

Then it was that the Russian mind awoke, and schools were founded, and all the necessary textbooks were published for elementary education, and everything worthy was translated from European languages; the Russian sword was unsheathed, monarchies were shaken to their foundations, kingdoms shattered and merged with Rus!<sup>833</sup>

Naimy may discuss the matter of translation synchronically, but he is no less effusive on the potential benefits of translation for the Arabic literary tradition. On a number of occasions in *al-Ġirbāl*, Naimy espouses the virtues of translating western literary texts and accentuates the superiority of western traditions, for instance in this citation from *ar-Riwāyah at-tamṭīliyyah al-'arabiyyah* (The Arabic Play):

It has become the custom of some to say our "literary renaissance" is nothing more than a breath fallen upon our poets and writers from the gardens of western literature.<sup>834</sup>

It is not until we come to a shorter work of criticism, more like an elaborated point in a literary manifesto, in actual fact, that Naimy expresses completely his feelings on the subject of translation:

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<sup>832</sup> Belinsky, p.32.

<sup>833</sup> Ibid., p.33.

<sup>834</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.30.

The poor man asks for charity if the toil of his own hand has not granted him what he needs to end his destitution. If his well should dry out of water, the thirsty man resorts to the well of his neighbour in order to quench his thirst. We ourselves are poor and yet we boast of riches and plenty. So why do we not meet our needs with the riches of others, is that not permitted? Our wells do not quench our thirst, so why do we not drink from the watering places of our neighbours as it is not forbidden to us?<sup>835</sup>

Naimy's belief in the phenomenon of theosis – a concept rooted in the potential deification of the human and therefore the fundamental equality of human beings in a world without political borders – informs this analogy, regarding those with greater resources as being neighbours in a community, rather than foreigners and strangers. Naimy spells out the solution for the Arab world's suffering in the next paragraph:

We are currently in a cycle of literary and social progress, in which I have perceived many spiritual needs which we did not feel before our close contact with the west. We do not have the pens and hallmarks we would need to satiate these needs. So let's translate!<sup>836</sup>

Belinsky followed this creed himself, translating a number of French works, including Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* (although I. I. Panaev noted that he only spoke French with difficulty).<sup>837</sup> Naimy, on the other hand, worked in an environment that worshipped and practised well the art of translation. As we have seen in previous chapters, *al-Funūn* was filled with translations from

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<sup>835</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.137.

<sup>836</sup> Ibid. The final phrase gives the Arabic title of the essay: *Falnutarjim!* (Let's Translate!).

<sup>837</sup> Bowman, p.37 and notes.

European languages, particularly Russian, and these were especially instrumental in the creation of the Arabic short story genre.<sup>838</sup> Naimy is summarising the shortcomings of Arabic literature and offering a potential answer to its needs, lest 'we wallow in its mud.'<sup>839</sup>

Such an explicit statement of the necessity and latent profitability of translation is a clear indication of Naimy's reading and understanding of the Russian literary criticism tradition. Sentiments concerning the exigency of translation would not *ipso facto* form components of the literary criticism heritage in western Europe, towards which both Naimy and Belinsky were looking for literary pointers. It also shows a clear understanding of how literatures develop through interaction with and adoption of foreign styles and forms, whilst retaining local content. Belinsky understood and expressed as much through his calls for a *national* Russian literature, and Naimy echoed the same postulate through all of his essays, and especially through the rallying call of *Falnutarjim!* (Let's Translate!)

One final point: Naimy, like Belinsky, could not help comparing Arabic literature with other literatures and thus arguing for it as an expression of national unity, even if that expression leaned more towards a pan-Arab sentiment than any declaration of political support for a fully independent Lebanon.<sup>840</sup> Regardless of any articulation of promotion of the Lebanese nation-state in *al-Ġirbāl*, there is still a clear division between self (the Arabs) and other (the western world). Although deliberately vague, this sentiment of

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<sup>838</sup> See Hafez.

<sup>839</sup> *Al-Ġirbāl*, p.138.

<sup>840</sup> At the time of writing, Lebanon was still part of the Ottoman Empire and would be for a further four years before becoming part of the French Mandate of Syria and Lebanon (Kamal Sulayman Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: a History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988)).

Naimy's was powerful enough to win the support of critics across the Arab world, including valuable patronage from some of the best-known, and most radical, critics in Egypt. In writing about the deficiencies of Arab literature, Naimy had created an Arab history that he believed would resonate with other Arab readers – and he was right.

We can read the same process happening in Belinsky's critical texts when he highlights the most effective facets of Gogol's writing:

The humorous or the comic in Mr. Gogol has a special character of its own; it is a purely Russian humour, a quiet, good-natured humour, in which the author assumes the air of a simpleton. [...] Objectivity is his idol. Evidence of this can be found in *Taras Bulba*, that marvellous epic, painted with a wide and bold brush, that penetrating sketch of the heroic life of a nation just coming into maturity, that broad picture in a narrow frame, worthy of Homer.<sup>841</sup>

There are two parts to this quotation. The 'Russian humour' of which Belinsky speaks is in regards to his work, *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*, and not the historical epic, *Taras Bulba*, that occupies the second part. However, both are useful for our purposes of comparing how both Naimy and Belinsky used literary criticism to forge an idea of the 'imagined community'<sup>842</sup> and of the created history of the nation-state. As we have remarked upon before, the identity of the Russian nation-state is complicated by its history in the nineteenth century, when it is possibly more rewarding to think of the country as the Russian Empire. Belinsky's conception of the Russian nation is

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<sup>841</sup> Quoted in Bowman, p.76.

<sup>842</sup> Anderson (2006).

clearly intended to be based upon Russian as its founding language and therefore all literature written in Russian to form part of the Russian literary heritage; Gogol, after all, was born and raised in Ukraine, although his literary works were all originally written and published in Russian.

Belinsky's reference to Homer further adds to this idea of creating a national history through criticism as he equates Gogol with the writer who will, in many people's minds, be the forefather of Ancient Greek literature: Homer. The irony is this allusion is that Homer's origins will remain obscure and have been the subject of much debate and conjecture ranging from his ethnic identity (Babylonian rather than Greek, according to Lucian) to his sex (female, according to Robert Graves).

The purpose of this digression is to illustrate how Belinsky's reaction to Russian literature and how, in his mind, it was helping to forge a burgeoning idea of Russian national identity, directly informs Naimy's conception of Arabic literature and how it could assist in shaping a new pan-Arab identity based on a fresh re-negotiation with the west and its literature.

These concepts, based on the relative poverty of Arabic literature in relation to the riches displayed in the western traditions, formed the basis of the first two essays to be published in *al-Funūn* and have consequently been treated as a distinct unit, outlining Naimy's preliminary thoughts before moving into more detailed investigations. The essays that constitute *al-Ġirbāl* introduce other literary ideas that will have no less a debt to the literary tradition from which Naimy was borrowing in order to formulate his notions into critical texts.

## Conclusion

### **Analysis and Future Research**

Naimy's dialogue with Russian literature began in childhood and continued until his nineties, as the most recently-dated letter written by the author on view to the public in the Academy of Sciences archive in St Petersburg confirms. As this covers a span of over eighty years, Naimy's attitude towards Russian literature was subject to many changes and adaptations, some of which were prompted by personal considerations and others by external political and social factors. In this thesis, we have not only looked at the way his literary outlook diversified, but have also contemplated the aspects of his dialogue with Russian literature that remained relatively constant throughout the course of Naimy's life.

In order to do this most effectively, we looked at four key areas of Naimy's writing and considered how his reading of Russian literature could be interpreted through that particular prism. In the first chapter we examined Naimy's spirituality and discovered how, in spite of his conversion to theosophy and his somewhat forced attempt to promote its tenets in his fiction and essays, his literary works display an adherence to the principles of Christianity, especially those as expressed by the Russian writer that Naimy came to see as his spiritual mentor: Leo Tolstoy. The resulting dialogue between Naimy, Tolstoy and theosophy produced one of the most idiosyncratic voices in modern Arabic literature.

The second chapter looked at Naimy's political stance and found that his readings of Russian literature had largely reinforced the socialist (and we noted the small 's') principles he expounded in, for instance, his short stories,

regardless of the utopian vision of a borderless world that was one of the goals of theosophy. However, Naimy's childhood and perception of the rural Arab world (and its position in a global economic hierarchy) informed a great deal of his thinking and consequently inspired many of the choices he made in reading Russian literature.

We found in the third chapter that Naimy's modes of expression in his shorter fiction was the product of a dialogue between Naimy and Russian literature, especially considering his reading of Chekhov and Gorky, and that there were a great many similarities between Naimy's vehicle for literary expression and that of writers in nineteenth-century Russia. While noting that the parallels between the production of Naimy's short stories and that of works by such writers as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky was significant, especially in the predominance of the literary journal in the field of cultural production, we conceded that the dialogue is at its most apparent in the contextual differences between the two eras.

Finally, for the fourth chapter we analysed how Naimy had interpreted and employed pivotal figures both from classical Arabic literature, especially poetry, and nineteenth-century Russian literary criticism to create a critical stance of his own towards both Russian and Arabic literatures. It is the meeting between two such divergent traditions of which the dialogue is partly constructed that makes Naimy's own critical writings such an individual contribution.

In spite of this being a reasonably thorough analysis of some of Naimy's works, his output was so voluminous that there is still more work to do on the writer. Very few studies exist in English of Naimy's writings and more research

is needed to untangle the complicated position that he sought to hold on spirituality and politics. As I have explained in the course of this thesis, Russian literature was an important part of his stance on spiritual and political issues, but a more complete study in English would benefit scholars of this important period in modern Arabic literature.

Furthermore, Naimy is only one part of a wider movement in the Arab world around the early part of the twentieth century that was reading Russian literature closely and using it in part to create a new expression in Arabic literature. A great deal of work on this issue has already been achieved by Sabry Hafez, but the centrality of Russian literature to the outlook of a number of literary journals at the start of the twentieth century is a subject that demands more attention, as it is in these literary journals that we can see the early shoots of the Arabic literary renaissance, and it is through them that many established writers published their earliest works. I have already published one article on this phenomenon, focusing on two literary journals' attitudes towards Russian literature,<sup>843</sup> but the ubiquity of Russian literature in many periodicals' pages means that we ought to do more research to try and understand why interest was so great, and in which literary journals has the phenomenon not been documented yet.

Researching the dialogue with Russian literature in the literary works of Naimy naturally prompts the question of which other Arab writers need to be studied in order to discover how their dialogue with Russian literature has affected their own works. There is scope for looking at how writers who have

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<sup>843</sup> Alyn Hine, 'The Influence of Russian Literature in Two Twentieth Century Arabic Periodicals' (Edition Twelve, Issue 1 - December 2010), online (<http://arts.monash.edu.au/publications/eras/edition-12/articles/hine.pdf>).

admitted the presence of Russian writers in their lives and works, such as Mahfouz, have reinterpreted and reimagined such authors in their fiction. It would perhaps be more profitable, however, to examine the works of an author like Ibrahim al-Koni, whose interest in Russian literature and period of study at the Gorky Institute in Moscow is acknowledged, and to study how authors such as Dostoevsky inform his work in a Saharan, Tuareg context. Utilising both approaches could help to bring my thesis, as one of my examiners has suggested, from a case study to a more conceptual analysis of how Russian literature is received in Arabic culture.

The manner in which the critical aesthetics of Belinsky and those of Naimy correspond has been a revelation to me over the course of writing this thesis. It is my contention that Belinsky must have been a participant in literary dialogue for a number of other Arab literary critics and we need a concentrated study to determine just how loudly his voice can be heard in the context of Arabic literary criticism.

In terms of the broader dialogue between Russian and Arabic literary criticism, far more work needs to be done by those with an interest in Arabic studies on the figure of Ignaty Krachkovsky. As a scholar, Krachkovsky occupies a place at the very highest echelons of Russian academia, but his work remains largely unknown in this country. The reasons have to be linguistic: few Arabic scholars would know enough Russian in order to read his works, and not many Russian scholars would be aware of the Arabic literary texts Krachkovsky cites. Yet his contribution to the field in general is enormous, particularly to that of the scholarship of modern Arabic literature. There is a great deal more work to be done on the particular circumstances

and context that allowed Krachkovsky to make such a prodigious input, and how his method of studying differed from that of his English, French and German counterparts.

Finally, there are still many *mahjar* writers whose works have not been introduced to Arabic studies in this country. While ar-Rīhānī and, of course, Jibrān are well-known to Western literature, Nasīb 'Arīḍa and 'Abd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād remain unfamiliar to all but specialists of the genre. More work needs to be done in this area to ensure that such a pivotal epoch in modern Arabic literature is researched properly and thoroughly.

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