

A Political or Apolitical Literature? ¹

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Abstract: *A popular literary argument circulating the literary circuit nowadays concerns the supposedly “apolitical” nature of literature. This view of literature and literary theory is particularly expounded in Western academic circles, which intentionally depoliticize the political, claiming that any “political” reading is propaganda, not scholarship. It will be argued that the “depoliticization” process is itself a political move at its core, as Edward Said explains in much of his work, especially in his book *The World, The Text and The Critic*. This research will examine when and why literature and literary theory become most significantly “political” or even “apolitical.” This entails a close consideration of certain critical views and literatures arising in what has been called “crises cultures,” in addition to a reconsideration of traditional apolitical readings of the works of English literary poets, such as William Blake and Percy Shelley.*

“These moods give no permission to be idle/
For men are changed by what they do.” W. H. Auden

The first lady of the United States of America, Laura Bush, says, “There is nothing political about American literature” (qtd. in Pollitt 2003). Bush, who had planned to have a conference at the White House in 2003 under the title “Poetry and the American Voice” had to “postpone” her “apolitical” event after an irritatingly political poet named Sam Hamil called upon other invitees to send him poems against America’s war on Iraq (Pollitt 2003). Another supposedly apolitical poet, Katha Pollitt, cattily called her short article about Mrs. Bush’s purely literary event, “Poetry Makes Nothing Happen? Ask Laura Bush.”

But the debate on the apolitical nature of literature does not end with the American First Lady’s comments. In fact, this view of literature is currently a popular argument circulating the literary circuit, particularly in Western academic circles, which intentionally depoliticize the political, claiming that any “political” reading is propaganda, not scholarship. This paper will examine when and why literature and literary theory become most significantly “political” or even “apolitical.” It will be shown how poets have indeed taken it upon themselves to become absorbed in the struggles of their people, to become political prophets. In fact, some have taken on the roles as their people’s storytellers, conscience raisers and history makers. The writer can mould and shape events; he can move his people; he can make

things happen. Chinua Achebe (1987:115) writes in his novel *Anthills of the Savannah* in reference to the role of the writer in his society:

His chalked eye will see every blow in a battle he never fought. So fully is he owned by the telling that sometimes—especially when he looks around him and finds no age-mate to challenge the claim—he will turn the marks left on him by the chicken pox and yaws he suffered in childhood into bullet scars...yes, scars from the day *our men* pounded *their men* like palm fruit in the heavy mortar of iroko!

This inevitably means that the poet will venture into the world of politics, and this is what makes things happen. To be involved in this process means to be involved in the dynamics of life—it means to be alive, active, concerned about the struggles of one’s people, to be in the thick of the struggle, so to speak, and not at a remove from history and history making. What poets have not been able to say directly, they have tried to say indirectly, allegorically, metaphorically, especially the English Romantic poets, who have thus far been traditionally read as mere nature poets, admiring the curative hand and healing powers of nature and pathetically seeking tranquility in nature. Neil Lazarus (1990:320) writes in his review of Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* (1987):

It is surely salutary to reflect in this context upon the fate of Blake and Milton and Shelley: despite their own radicalism and the (re) politicizing labors of many scholars working ‘against the grain,’ the hegemony of tranquilized readings of their work remains intact, if not perhaps, as serenely so as twenty or thirty years ago.

Laura Bush’s declarations aside, why would a serious literary critic like Lawrence Hyman (1988:65) be so adamant about his premise that literature is an apolitical activity? In fact, Hyman hopes to “form the basis for a defense of critical pluralism as an apolitical enterprise.” Hyman believes that it is our common sense that will allow us to distinguish between propaganda and good teaching. He argues that if fields such as physics and biology can confirm the veracity of a theory, why can’t the humanities do the same (*ibid.*)? Hyman draws on Wayne Booth’s theory of “critical pluralism,” which would allow for “objectivity” and diversity at the same time. Hyman would like for the humanities to arrive at certain “truths,” such as those that exist in the discipline of physics (for example, free fall in physics); however, Hyman would also place these “truths” within the boundaries of an apolitical enterprise in order to achieve “objectivity.” Then, it seems he would allow us to interpret freely within the confines of an apolitical discourse. It is interesting to note the contradictory nature of the previous sentence—freedom and confinement are the criteria of Hyman’s theory. These two terms do not reside within the same

boundaries unless we think of one individual's freedom (the western paradigm) as the cause of another individual's confinement (the nonwestern paradigm). Hyman, drawing on Wayne Booth's theory of "critical pluralism," begins his "purification" attempts by emphasizing that the "chief value of a novel or a poem [is] in its uniqueness, in its 'particularity', rather than in its relationship to other works" (*Ibid.*66). Hyman agrees with Booth's proposition that literary critics should attempt to formulate their values from "within the enterprise of criticism," distancing themselves from external ethical systems of belief (qtd. in Hyman 1988:67). Booth argues:

Unless we can agree on standards and values that arise from the study of literature, and not from our political views, literary criticism ceases to be a discipline. If literature is to be solely an instrument with which we wage our political battles, the very idea of the university is itself called into question... (*ibid.*).

These so-called standards and values that literary critics need to agree upon should arise from within the study of literature and not from external moral or political motives. This is to say that the literary critic's belief system is something external to himself.

The literary critic then is to follow a certain set of agreed upon "literary" values that would never approach any of his/her moral and political understandings of the text in particular. This means that moralistic or political interpretations of a given text would be dogmatically rejected by the democratically bourgeois pluralism of Booth and his admirer, Hyman. Hyman's and Booth's critical endeavours are focused on the attempt to establish a scientific objectivity of the sort found in physics and biology. The only *real* objections to the Booth/Hyman hypothesis (and "politics" aside), argues Hyman (1988:70), is that:

in countries where Marxism or Leninism is the official philosophy, we do have another approach to knowledge which, at times, at least, is completely outside the world of reasoned discourse. That world, of course, is one in which there are fixed meanings decided upon by self-appointed vanguards and enforced, not by bourgeois phallogocentric logic, but by proletarian or (Islamic) violence.

My simplest analysis of Hyman's understanding of the word "politics" is that it is something that others do, not what "I" do; however, while pretending to keep politics away, Hyman mercilessly, albeit parenthetically, takes us into the realm of the purely political. Mr. Hyman's interpretations presumably belong to the world of "reasoned discourse," being a member of western "phallogocentric logic," and so does his use of the parenthetically enclosed phrase "(Islamic violence)." Islamic violence, according to the above formulation, becomes a purely

“literary” and “apolitical” description. Any critic who does not interpret according to the rules of Hyman’s “reasoned” discourse belongs to the world of Islamic violence or “fascism,” to use a more current word, that is, George Bush’s phrase “Islamic fascists.” Thus, the violent and fascist interpretations of certain critics can be rejected as political propaganda, which really amounts to illogical textual violence on the part of Hyman. Yet what Hyman, and others like him, do not like to admit is that their rejection of a text or response to literature based on the above is purely political, or an example of illogical and violent western phallogocentric “logic.” However, Hyman (1988:70), being the pluralistic democrat that he is, is willing to allow into his community of discourse even the “most radical critics—feminists, Marxists, neo-Marxists, or whatever” if these writers are “willing to change their ideas in the light of more evidence, new insights, and a more careful logic”. That is very kind of Mr. Hyman since he is willing to give us a second chance to change—or is he? Hyman was very careful to include the word “Islamic” in parenthesis when talking about the irrationally violent and perhaps very careful to exclude it when considering whether to give those radicals a chance to enter his community of logical “apolitical” interpreters.

A problem arises, however, when the reasoned apolitical critic comes face to face with a very political poet or novelist. How is it that the poet comes to define himself and his literature politically? And if this is the case, how can one respond apolitically to something that is so intentionally political? Why would Hyman impose upon the poet, the text and the critic rules that would extricate them from the world they inhabit? An opposing point of view is put forward by Timothy J. Reiss, who argues that European literature, in fact, came into existence as an “ordering response” to the “grand confusion of the period 1550-1650” and “provided a point of reference and ideological cohesion for political and cultural relations” (qtd. in Cascardi 1993:397). Reiss’s view is that literature arises as a response to turmoil, “unreason” and “madness.” This premise is rejected by Anthony Cascardi (1993) in his article about Reiss’s book *Meaning of Literature*. Cascardi wants to see literature, and precisely the novel, as an independent development. Reiss, however, maintains that literature in general, along with politics, philosophy, and ethics function “quite similarly [as] work in any domain is capable of moving work in any other domain” (qtd. in Cascardi 1993:408).

In the light of these arguments, what are we to make of the following comments from Percy B. Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* (1821):

Poets are hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved

not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world (Shelley 2004:130).

In fact, Shelley sees the poet as a leader, a prophet, a legislator, one who possesses divine powers and who must use those powers to guide society out of its decadence. Shelley's poet, in fact, is not a man speaking to men; the poet has divine prophetic powers, which he must use "to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution" (*ibid.*). A poet must use his divine skill to *make things happen*, to guide, lead and legislate to his people, especially at times of social and political crises. This is why Shelley could not forgive William Wordsworth for not committing himself, for escaping into an idle nature and extricating himself from the social and political life around him. For Shelley, Milton was great because he was a prophet/poet imbued with a divine spirit, and he "stood alone illuminating an age unworthy of him" (*ibid.*:117). Milton, like Shelley, used his "poetry [as] a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed" (*ibid.*). Shelley makes clear his criticism of Wordsworth in much of his poetry, a fact conveniently ignored by the "tranquilized readings" (Lazarus, 1990:320) of the English Romantic poets. The unsheathed sword of Shelley is pointed at Wordsworth for betraying his role as a prophetic voice:

Thou wert as a lone star, whose light did shine
 On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar:
 Thou hast like to a rock built refuge stood
 Above the blind and battling multitude:
 In honoured poverty thy voice did weave
 Songs consecrate to truth and liberty,--
 Deserting these, thou leavest me to grieve,
 Thus having been, that thou shouldst cease to be (Shelley 2004:90).

The poet's voice must weave songs of truth and liberty. By deserting these principles, Wordsworth has made himself nonexistent, irrelevant. The poet must speak the truth and diagnose the illness of his society even if this means criticizing policies which both Shelley and Blake, true to their roles as prophetic poets, feel they are obligated to do.

Shelley's unsheathed sword is indeed very sharp when he points it at the corrupt institutions of his society in "England 1819":

A people starved and stabbed in th' untilled field
 An army, whom liberticide and prey
 Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield;
 Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
 Religion Christless, Godless—a book sealed (*ibid.*:94).

Far from the traditional image of the introspective nature loving escapism of the English Romantic poets, Shelley's response is public and political—totally absorbed in the suffering of his people. The

starved and stabbed people are victims of decadent policies, such as the above mentioned treacherous army that turns its sword against the same people that it is supposed to protect, hypocritical laws and a corrupt church. Shelley feels that it is his mission as a prophet/poet to speak the truth bravely and not to escape into a Wordsworthian solitary existence. Stephen C. Behrendt (1986:257) quotes the following from Shelley's *A Philosophical View of Reform* in a rare article that tackles the publicly committed role of the English Romantic poets entitled "'The Consequence of High Powers': Blake, Shelley, and Prophecy's Public Dimension":

The true patriot will endeavor to enlighten and unite the nation and animate it with enthusiasm and confidence. The patriot will be foremost to publish the boldest truths in the most fearless manner.

Shelley is very clear and direct about the reason for the people's suffering in "England 1819," but like other Romantic poets, he often uses metaphor and allegory to say what he cannot say directly. In his *Prometheus Unbound*, he offers an explanation of the oppressor/oppressed relationship by means of the classical myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from heaven and gave it to man. According to Shelley, the powerful have power because the weak accept the status quo; they do not question that power, thereby allowing the powerful to rule over them. The weak, then, are responsible for their own oppression by helping to maintain the status quo:

...Thou art omnipotent
O'er all things but thyself I gave thee power,
And my own will (qtd. in Bygrave 2004:212).

In effect, the slave is responsible for his own slavery, the colonized is responsible for his own occupation, the weak for his weakness. If the people have the *will* to resist, they can. This is Shelley's call for revolution in the form of an allegory. Thus, the form itself (i.e., allegory) is being used to forward a very political message, in fact, a revolutionary message. Shelley is not escaping into nature in Wordsworth's usual style. He places himself in the middle of the social/political muddle, diagnoses the problem and attempts to provide the prescription for the illness. The causes of the illness are not only from without but also, and more importantly, from within. Contrast with Shelley, Wordsworth, whose prescription for the disease of "ruthless mortals [who] wage incessant wars," is shown in the lines below:

Opening its vast abyss, while fancy feeds
On the rich show!—But list! A voice is near;
Great Pan himself low whispering through the reeds,
'Be thankful thou; for, if unholy deeds
Ravage the world, tranquility is here!' (Wordsworth 2004:105).

Wordsworth will escape from the political turmoil and social upheaval by heeding Pan's call, Pan being the god of nature. In other words, Wordsworth will turn his face away and find solitude in nature. He will not listen to the cries and suffering of the people, but to the comforting voice of Pan. He is a poet who has chosen not to be a prophet or a guide to his people. And from Shelley's point of view, he who has been graced with divine talents and given a powerful voice with which to speak the truth, yet decides to remain silent, is the most decadent of beings. Shelley writes in the "Preface" to *Alastor*:

They who, deluded by no generous error, instigated by no sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge, duped by no illustrious superstition, loving nothing on this earth, and cherishing no hopes beyond, yet keep aloof from sympathies with their kind, rejoicing neither in human joy nor mourning with human grief; these, and such as they, have their apportioned curse. They languish, because none feel with them their common nature. They are morally dead. They are neither friends, nor lovers, nor fathers, nor citizens of the world, nor benefactors of their country....Those who love not their fellow-beings live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave (2004:74-75).

For Shelley, involvement in the social and political situation is also about the love of humanity, concern for human life, our "fellow-beings"; how can one stay aloof from humanity and call oneself a human being? Caring for humanity means involving oneself in the struggles of humanity. This is why nature for Shelley is not healing in the same way it is for Wordsworth and Coleridge. Nature cannot solve the problems of man. Man must solve the problems of man. All is not harmonious within nature because nature itself possesses conflicting forces as Shelley points out in *Alastor* where he describes nature as follows:

I have made my bed
In charnels and on coffins, where black death
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee (2004:75).

These are quite different images of nature than the ones with which we are familiar. In a very unwordsworthian style, Shelley shows how nature can also be a place of "black death" and not always a heaven of tranquility. The solution to the chaos and turmoil in society is found within the very humanity of man.

In the same vein, the earliest male Romantic poet, William Blake, takes it upon himself to use his divine skill for the sake of suffering humanity. Blake, like Shelley, takes on an oppositional stance. In his *Descriptive Catalogue* Blake writes; "The times require that every one should do his duty, in Arts, as well as in Arms, or in the Senate" (qtd. in Behrendt 1986:257). In other words, one must fight

injustice by all means—by the pen and the sword. Like in Shelley’s poetry, nature is not an essential part of William Blake’s platform. To resist the social and political order is for Blake a duty. For the prophet/poet, existence means resistance; however, to withdraw from the life of the people, is in the words of Shelley (2004:90), to “cease to be,” and to be “morally dead” (*ibid.*:74). For Blake, nature does not provide a hiding place that will “reconcile one to all the jarrings and conflicts of the wide world” as is the case with Coleridge (qtd. in Bygrave 2004:33). Blake (2004:22) questions the cruel authority of the Church in the “Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence*:

Then naked and white, all their bags let behind,
They rise upon clouds and sport in the wind;
And the angel told Tom, if he’d be a good boy,
He’d have God for his father, and never want joy.

And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags and our brushes to work;
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm-
So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.

By means of the use of irony, Blake is able to attack the Established Church of England for its conspiratorial role in subjugating the innocent chimney sweepers. This is Blake’s comment on how the Church played a corrupt role at the time in maintaining an oppressive status quo by using religion to keep the oppressed in their place—that is, “if all do their duty they need not fear harm.” Their duty is to obey, to surrender their rights, to “never want joy.” To ignore such suffering and injustice is to encourage the continuation of the status quo, the continuation of the injustice, and this would not be a politically innocent act. When one ignores the disease, the disease will spread. Thus Blake does his duty by using his “divine” voice to make public the suffering of the oppressed. Sometimes, Blake’s voice resonates loud and clear when he cries out in *Jerusalem*: “England! awake! awake! awake!” Shelley sounds a similar cry of “Awake, awake, awake,” “Arise, arise, arise” in his political poems of 1819 (qtd. in Behrendt 1986:258).

Blake’s rejection of the dominant male logic that is responsible for the psychological and physical subjugation of women is clear in his allegorical “Visions of the Daughters of Albion.” Blake creates a situation which highlights the false male logic of the two male figures in the poem, Bromion, who violates the virgin purity of Oothoon, and Oothoon’s hypocritical lover Theotormon, who is unable to accept Oothoon’s spiritual purity after her physical violation. This, of course, shows that Theotormon subscribes to the same unjust and violent patriarchal order which dominated England at the time:

Religious dreams and holy vespers light thy smoky fires—

Once were thy fires lighted by the eyes of honest morn.
 And does my Theotormon seek this hypocrite modesty,
 This knowing, artful, secret, fearful, cautious, trembling hypocrite?
 Then is Oothoon a whore indeed, and all the virgin joys
 Of life are harlots, and Theotormon is a sick man's dream,
 And Oothoon is the crafty slave of selfish holiness (Blake 2004:39).

It is obvious here that Blake is questioning the male logic that enslaves women—"this hypocrite modesty" by which women are kept in a prison of physical oppression. Thus Blake gives Oothoon, who represents women in general, a voice to resist her repression. We are told that every morning Oothoon's defiant wailing is heard, telling the story of the illogical law of "Urizenic oppression," which as Graham Allen (2004:218) points out, is "best captured in the line 'And is there not one law for both the lion and the ox?' (l. 116), a line which echoes one from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: 'One law for the lion and the ox is oppression.'" Contrast this oppressive male logic of their being one law for the lion and the ox with Oothoon's more logical and humane reasoning in "Visions of the Daughters of Albion": "With what sense does the parson claim the labour of the farmer?" (Blake 2004:38). Notice how even the imagery used by Bromion involves animals whereas that used by Oothoon involves human beings; it is as if Blake is insinuating that male logic is similar to the law of the jungle, but female logic is a more civilized and humane law. As we can see, Blake, like Shelley, is a committed prophet/poet, who makes it his divine duty to alleviate the suffering of people because of his deep love and sympathy for them. This is why Blake believes that it is imperative that he create a system as he states in his prophetic book *Jerusalem*: "I must Create a System or be enslav'd by another Mans" (qtd. in Bygrave 2004:217). With these words, Blake is indeed affirming his prophetic role, his commitment, as does Shelley (2004:107) in "Ode to the West Wind" in which he declares:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
 Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
 And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
 Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
 Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,
 If winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

The committed writer is motivated by his love for "all human kind" as Shelley states in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" (qtd. in Behrendt 1986:258), which is interestingly the same reason given by another

committed poet (albeit of a different century); William Butler Yeats similarly sees an “excess of love” as the main motivation of the Irish rebels in “Easter 1916”: “And what if excess of love/Bewilderd them till they died?” (Yeats 1992:230) It is this “excess of love” which drives the prophetic poet who has a compassionate heart, or to use Shelley’s (2004:75) words, the “tender-hearted,” who are concerned about their communities.

In their book, *New Trends and Generations in African Literature*, Eldred Durosimi Jones and Majorie Jones (1996:121) argue:

Commitment emanates from a positive but pained state of mind—suffering, sacrifice, selflessness, determination to defy misery and triumph over travails—given life through action...Commitment is concomitant with Resistance; for, the reality necessitating commitment is an inhumanism, ...Commitment is made meaningful by such plagues as racism, repression, oppression, exploitation, determination to destroy the helpless, innocent victim.

In fact, a political response is the most *natural* of reactions in times of crisis. It is precisely human suffering and oppression that forces individuals to commit themselves and become active participants in their people’s struggles. It is an excess of love that makes one all the more human.

Ghassan Kanafani is another committed writer in a “crisis culture.” Kanafani rejects the supposed apolitically detached stance of the writer in his critical work *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine* in the same way that another writer, the Puerto Rican Manuel Maldonado Denis argues against this detached critical stance: “Isolation itself is already a posture” (qtd. in Harlow 1987:4). The detached apolitical stance entails the perpetuation of the status quo, and is in essence a political stance. It is indeed interesting to note how different critics can make contradictory statements about Kanafani’s fiction. Compare these *two* statements:

Ghassan Kanafani, in referring to Palestinian literature as “resistance literature,” is writing within a specific historical context, a context which may be most immediately situated within the contemporary national liberation struggles and resistance movements against Western imperialist domination of Africa, Central and South America, and the Middle and Far East (Harlow 1987:4).

Concentrating on the day-to-day tragedy of one family, Kanafani avoided theorizing about wider historical issues. By refusing both to analyze the causes of the flight of this family [the family in “The Land of Sad Oranges”] and to indulge in accusations against specific groups, he gave his characters, passive victims of events, a universal quality that is reinforced by the symbol of their banishment (Kilpatrick 1999:11).

The clear difference between these two statements is in the theoretical and ideological stance taken by these two critics. One is trying to play up the political and historical elements of Kanafani's literature while the other is trying to play down these very same elements, claiming a more universal approach. Harlow is referring to the actual context of Kanafani's writing, and is in fact, drawing on Kanafani's own very clear political commitment as a writer; however, Kilpatrick seems to want to set aside certain aspects that would be considered "political." Notice Kilpatrick's interest in and her intentional slighting of "wider historical issues" and her dislike for accusing "specific groups" for the suffering of the Palestinian people. She is also careful to point out how Kanafani supposedly portrays his characters as "passive victims of events." This intentionally apolitical reading of Kanafani is political at the core. Kilpatrick does not want to blame the Jews or the West for the victimization of the Palestinian people. The Palestinian people, or possibly even, people in general, since Kilpatrick may want to drop the word "Palestinian" for its obvious "political" overtones, were perhaps born to suffer in the same meaningless way that Samuel Beckett's characters suffer endlessly. Another important question is: are Kanafani's characters "passive victims of events" and does their passivity bestow upon them the desired apolitical universal quality? It is obvious that Barbara Harlow's analysis is openly political, and she is not hiding this fact; however, it is also true that Kilpatrick's "apolitical" reading is equally political, but she has a hidden agenda and prefers to hide behind a mask of universality.

It is strange how Kilpatrick can see Kanafani's characters as "passive victims of events" or, this is probably a more acceptable way of seeing them, because, passively, they can offer no resistance. This is precisely the point. Without resistance, there is no change. We are allowed to sympathize with their suffering, but we are not meant to understand or question it. Is it this passivity that Kilpatrick saw in "Letter from Gaza," a short story that she translated from Arabic? Kanafani's characters are not, as Kilpatrick believes, "passive victims of events." They are active and committed. However, Kilpatrick's reading of these characters is, to use Edward Said's word, "affiliated," not free of Kilpatrick's own political and ideological beliefs. Kilpatrick wishes to de-politicize and neutralize a literature that is deeply committed and a situation that is explosively political, again due to her affiliations that produce the scope or boundaries within which her text exists. The narrator's call to his friend Mustafa in "Letter from Gaza" (Kanafani 1999) is a call to action, not inaction. The narrator demands that Mustafa give up the "greenery, water and lovely faces" of California and come back to the thick of the struggle. This awakening in the

narrator, who works in Kuwait and has just been accepted in the department of Civil Engineering at the University of California, comes as a result of meeting, what Kilpatrick would term, “passive victims of events”; except, the victim here, a thirteen year old girl named Nadia, the narrator’s niece, is not at all passive. In fact, she sacrifices her own body and loses one of her legs in order to save her little brothers and sisters from the Israeli bombardment of the Shajjiya quarter of Gaza. The narrator refuses to go to California and “live for [him]self (Kanafani 1999:112); suddenly Gaza, the “amputated town” which had previously reminded the narrator of “failed pictures painted in gray by a sick man” changes. The selfless Nadia’s “amputated [leg] from the top of the thigh” awakens in him a purpose in life, a *raison d’etre*, unlike his existence in Kuwait where his life had a “gluey, vacuous quality as though [he] were a small oyster, lost in oppressive loneliness” (*ibid.*). Gray Gaza becomes the color of blood after he visits the amputated Nadia in the amputated town:

I went out of the hospital in Gaza that day, my hand clutched in silent derision on the two pounds I had brought with me to give Nadia. The blazing sun filled the streets with the color of blood. And Gaza was brand new, Mustafa! You and I never saw it like this (*ibid.*:115).

The narrator’s awakening is the birth of resistance in him, which, of course, is symbolic of the Palestinian resistance movement. The meaninglessness of his existence in Kuwait and Mustafa’s irrelevant existence in pretty California is replaced by the meaningfulness of his new existence in Gaza, where even the “stone piled up at the beginning of the Shajjiya quarter where [they] lived had a meaning” (*ibid.*). This marks the beginning of the struggle for the narrator where the “way back home” would be a “long, long road leading to Safad” (*ibid.*). His new path of resistance would be “something like the reclamation of the amputated leg” (*ibid.*). The image of amputation, in fact, emphasizes the underlying historical and political context of this story. The symbolic reclamation of Nadia’s leg is what gives historical and political referencing to this story. Like Nadia’s leg, Palestine has been amputated. Gaza has been separated from the mainland by the establishment of the state of Israel. Reclaiming Nadia’s leg means reclaiming the whole land of Palestine, and this means that the new road that our narrator will tread upon is a road that would connect Gaza in the south to Safad in the north. The amputation of the land is as unnatural as the amputation of the body. How did Kilpatrick miss this point? Or, perhaps, Kilpatrick intentionally overlooked this point in order to downplay Kanafani’s political message to his people due to her own political and ideological beliefs, which do not correspond to those of Kanafani. This is not a story about universal suffering; it is a politically and historically affiliated text as is Kilpatrick’s analysis.

Overlooking the significance of the image of amputation would indeed create an amputated text.

Every text is, as Edward Said (1991:174) argues, affiliated, whether it purports to be political or apolitical. The affiliations of the text include a network of associations which include cultural, social, and political aspects, in addition to conditions of publication and the status of the author. All of these conditions are what bind the text to the world from which it arises. We have already seen how the text becomes committed and significantly political in “crisis cultures,” a term which has been defined by Elinor Wilner as an oppressed groups desire to bring forth a “reversal of the status quo in which the last shall be first” (Behrendt 1992:394). Thus, it is this feeling of oppression that is especially addressed in this kind of literature, which indeed is a kind of survival politics.

The narrator’s call at the end of “Letter from Gaza” is not only a call to his friend Mustafa. It is a call to all Palestinians and Arabs: “I won’t come to you. But you, return to us! Come back, to learn from Nadia’s leg, amputated from the top of the thigh, what life is and what existence is worth” (Kanafani 1999:115). This is a call for commitment which arises from an “excess of love,” a love of humanity. Kilpatrick’s attempts to deliberately undo the political/historical setting, claiming that Kanafani draws a neutral background to his stories in which history is referenced out, is not doing Kanafani any justice. Kilpatrick’s membership in a culture of power explains her desire to maintain the status quo, seeing in Kanafani’s stories passive characters, who can do nothing in literature or real life. They are simply figures in a painting who do not exist outside the given picture frames. Therefore, in such a situation the balance is not disturbed; the text does not engage itself with any real world. But the world is *real* for Kanafani’s characters, and Kanafani affirms this reality in his final call to Mustafa to return to Gaza; Kanafani, like so many writers before and after him, understands that he “must be the voice of his voiceless people.” (Jones 1996:121-122).

Thus, the commitment of the poet is his commitment to his people. Chinua Achebe, like Blake, Shelley and Kanafani, believes that it is his duty to educate his people, to awaken them out of their slumber and to teach them about their history and culture and help them regain their dignity:

The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer’s duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. There is a saying in Ibo that a man who can’t tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them (qtd. in Killam 1969:8).

This kind of analysis entails a thorough understanding of the social, cultural and political situation. The writer, for Achebe, must understand his people's struggles more penetratingly than others if he is to teach and guide his people. Achebe cannot excuse the writer for not taking on his role as a teacher in the same way as Shelley could not forgive Wordsworth for ceasing to exist *politically* and *prophetically* for his people. In fact, one can indeed see great similarities in Achebe's view of the role of the writer and Blake's and Shelley's views of the role of the poet. For Achebe, "the writer cannot be excused from the task of re-education and re-generation that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. For he is after all...the sensitive point in his community..." (qtd. in Killam 1969:8). This duty of the writer is most obviously amplified in times of crisis because it is at these most critical moments that there is a great need for guiding the lost, ordering the chaotic, alleviating the suffering of the masses, and providing a voice for the voiceless. Is it surprising, then, that writers become most significantly political in cultures and countries that are undergoing a crisis? Isn't the idea of a committed literature found in those societies in which the suffering of the people is most pronounced, and isn't commitment in writing and responding to literature, the most human "common sense reality"?

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Note

- ¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the APETAU Third International Conference held at the University of Jordan, 23-25 August 2006.

