

naissant de l'être-dans-le-monde métropolitain mâtiné des Antilles et de l'Amérique.

J'aime croire que l'oeuvre de Joël Des Rosiers annonce le temps fort d'une littérature haïtienne-canadienne qui évacue l'ethnicité en mettant l'accent plutôt sur l'écrivain en situation avec les mots, principe premier de toute écriture.

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Naim Kattan, *le discours arabe*, and Empty Words

Most Canadian literati associate Naim Kattan's name with the Canada Council and would probably agree with the appellation chosen for him by Jacques Godbout (in a 1976 review), "la fée des bourses [à Ottawa]" (12).¹ Kattan's role as a federalist bureaucrat entrusted with the promotion of 'Canadian literature' has angered some Québec writers and critics, who have taken their revenge by refusing Kattan a place in their ranks. For example, the *Dictionnaire pratique des auteurs québécois* published in the same year as Godbout's review, makes no mention of Kattan's literary creations, classifying him only as "critique littéraire" (369). Listing Kattan's name in the *Dictionnaire* but stripping him of his credits is a cunning and backhanded way of 'acknowledging' him as a Québec writer.

English Canadians have also applied labels to Kattan. A 1979 article in *Saturday Night* revels in the irony of its title, "Our only Arab-Jewish-French-Canadian Writer" (Anonymous 9). Another review in English describes Kattan's first novel, *Adieu Babylone*, as "a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Iraqi Jew Trying to be French" (Spettigue 512).

These examples notwithstanding, English Canada has been kinder to Kattan, the writer. He fares better in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* which introduces him as an essayist, novelist, and short story writer and presents a comprehensive view of his career in Canada. More taken with the idea of the Canadian mosaic, English-Canadian critics have adopted Kattan as the very model of cross-culturalism. Hence the title of I.M. Owen's review: "Why an Arabic-speaking, Baghdadborm Jew is a perfect guide to the modern Canadian experience" (5) or Wayne Grady's assessment: "Though cosmopolitan in content, Naim Kattan's short stories explore a familiar Canadian duality: the plight of the stranger in his own land" (9).

Somewhere between these two extremes, i.e., Kattan the devoted bureaucrat and Kattan the perfectly assimilated Canadian writer, there is

1 This article will appear, in a revised version, in *Canadian Literature*.

Kattan the marginal writer. My use of the term 'marginal' obviously reflects the reception of his works in both French and English Canada. Despite the volume of his publications very few have attracted critical attention. It is his life and institutional role which has been of interest. In classifying Kattan as a 'marginal' writer, I also refer to his deliberate position *vis-à-vis* the Canadian literary institution — that of existing on the periphery.

One might ask how it is possible or why it is even desirable for any writer to be 'deliberately' peripheral. The answer, to be deciphered through the maze of Kattan's life and career, provides interesting insights into certain detrimental aspects of literary interference.

Let us begin with Kattan's choice of literary languages in Canada and elsewhere. Although English Canadians have found more of an affinity with Kattan, he insists on writing in French. As a result, his most receptive audience is forced to reach him through the barrier of translations — this, in spite of the fact that Kattan received equal training in both languages: "J'avais le choix entre le français et l'anglais comme deuxième langue, c'était à parité. J'apprenais autant l'anglais que le français et j'ai choisi le français parce que pour moi l'Occident libérateur était francophone" (Allard 13). For Kattan, English has always been associated with the British occupation of Iraq, while French created an illusory link with freedom and 'authentic' self-expression. That is perhaps why to this day, his choice of literary language remains firm: "It was so painful for me to change from writing in Arabic to writing in French — and it cost me 15 years of silence — that I don't think I will ever be able to make a change again. I am satisfied writing in French, since there's a public for what I say in that language. I can write in French without feeling that I am exiled" (Simpson 36). What goes unnoticed by Kattan's interviewer, who is intent upon fitting him into a 'Canadian' pattern, is the allusion to his mother tongue, Arabic. This closing statement of the interview reveals, if only indirectly, the essential in understanding Kattan — what I will call the need to exist on the margins.

Although born into the Jewish community of Baghdad and educated both in Hebrew and Arabic, he opted for Arabic and its literary heritage. Even today, he boasts of his ability to recite the *Koran* better than his Muslim compatriots. His first short stories and critical pieces were published in Arabic: "...je me suis rendu compte que pour moi ce qui comptait c'était écrire en arabe. C'était de ma langue maternelle que j'étais fier" (Allard 12).

This duality of vision is even reflected in his name, which is at once Arabic and Hebrew.²

Kattan's insistence on Arabic might appear as a first step towards integration into the mainstream of Iraqi life. Yet, we must recognize the extent to which this decision placed him on the periphery of two linguistic and literary systems. His accent in Arabic always singled him out as an outsider among Muslims, while his refusal to write in Hebrew made him a stranger to his Jewish culture. In the opening chapter of *Adieu Babylone*, Kattan's semi-autobiographical novel, the reader glimpses this clash of identities. The protagonist's Jewish friend, Nessim, insists on communicating with the Muslims in his own dialect of Arabic. In contrast, the protagonist chooses silence, before arriving at another solution: "Je choisis un moyen terme. Mes mots n'étaient ni ceux des juifs ni ceux des Musulmans. Je m'exprimais en arabe littéraire, coranique" (*Adieu Babylone* 12).

This same tendency to choose the position of the outsider prevailed during his stay in France. When finally liberated from the language of both oppressors, i.e., Arabic and English, he continued to write and publish in Arabic. In Canada, once again, he chose to move against the tide and became an anomaly in the Jewish community of Montreal. Recalling an incident in his early years in Canada, he points to his own tragic flaw:

Il y avait quelqu'un qui m'a dit... De quelle nationalité vous êtes? Je lui dis irakienne. Alors il me dit: oui, mais c'est quoi ça Irakien, vous êtes Musulman? Je dis: non, alors il me dit: vous êtes de nationalité juive? Je dis: Ce n'est pas une nationalité, il me répond: Il fallait le dire, pourquoi vous n'allez pas chez vous? Il fallait, et c'était un choix à l'époque, me dire que j'étais refusé par tout le monde ou me dire c'était ma chance d'appartenir à personne. (Allard 24)

The only mould into which Kattan's affinities can be fit is that of a cross-cultural man. The title of his most recent novel, *La Fortune du passager*, aptly emphasizes his vagabond spirit. The historical necessity of wandering across cultural barriers becomes clear in the light of Kattan's biography. But its implications for his literary endeavours still remain obscure.

While writing in French and identifying with its literary traditions, Kattan refuses to suppress a past closely linked with Arabic and Hebrew. He claims that his style of writing, which leaves much to the imagination of the reader, is derived from Arabic narrative techniques. Quite often essential details

2 "En hébreu, le nom *Kattan* veut dire *petit*. C'est une description, comme dans toutes les langues il y a des noms des gens petits. Mais *Naïm* veut dire charmant, agréable. Alors il y avait cette double signification. Du côté arabe le mot *Naïm* est encore plus élogieux. C'est la grande fortune d'être dans un climat de paradis. Et *Kattan* veut dire cotonnier" (Allard, 11).

remain unsaid. In *Adieu Babylone*, for instance, the protagonist is never named and although we recognize an autobiographical speaker in the text, he remains a shadowy figure throughout. This creates a sense of distance not usually associated with biographical narratives.

Kattan attributes this style of composition to what he calls *le discours arabe*; in the above-mentioned interview in answer to a question regarding the prudish air of his texts, Kattan explains:

Je ne peux plus dire à cet égard que je suis tout à fait Arabe. Il y a deux aspects de ce discours arabe qui expliquent un peu peut-être mes écrits. D'abord on parle beaucoup mais l'essentiel, ce qui est le plus fragile, quand il est encore fragile en nous, on ne le dévoile pas parce qu'on a honte de cette fragilité... Dans le discours arabe, il y a beaucoup de mots, les gens parlent beaucoup mais l'essentiel est très peu dit... le deuxième élément dans le discours qui vient de mon enfance et qui est de ma culture, c'est de dire aux autres ce qui leur fait plaisir, même si c'est pas tout à fait vrai. (15)

The crucial elements in this description, at least in so far as it applies to Kattan's texts, are the cryptic and highly codified nature of language. There is a strong sense of the alien and the unutterable in *Adieu Babylone*, very little dialogue, and the characters are barely outlined and are not introspective. To borrow Kattan's own words, the essential is never said.

Some of this effect can be attributed to cultural differences. Kattan himself encourages this type of interpretation through the notion of *le discours arabe*. Some critics have taken the same route. For instance, Spettigue speaks of "cultural differences difficult for Westerners to understand," which then develop into communication barriers between author and reader:

One does not question the authenticity of the representation; but the result is to deepen the shadow-effect. All seems disembodied, unreal, except in moments of sordid and commonplace reality... Socially and politically we are filled in on the current movements, journalistically, and this helps, but at the same time it reinforces the feeling that with the protagonist we inhabit a world of shadows... It is not that *Farwell, Babylon* is unconvincing at all, but that it is exile literature, essentially colonial, recording marginal people for whom everything important happens somewhere else. (510)

What creates the 'shadow-effect' in *Adieu Babylone* and Kattan's other works of fiction is not merely a function of his exile. In fact, his thematic preoccupation seems to be immigration rather than exile. I would suggest that the roots of this narrative unease are in Kattan's medium of expression. This is not to say that by choosing French he has denied himself and his creative works accessibility to Western audiences. My contention is that

Kattan's very understanding of the way in which language functions forces him onto a position of permanent marginality.

In his essay *Le Réel et le théâtral*, Kattan outlines the differences between Eastern and Western cultures in terms of their relationship to 'reality.' Following Hegel's footsteps, he argues that for the Semites there exists no mediation between man and nature — or as he puts it between man and reality. In the West, on the contrary, man achieves the same relationship through the theatrical and the illusory. In a passage reminiscent of early German Romantic thought, he explains his understanding of the East-West dichotomy in the following manner:

...C'est l'homme qui établit une alliance avec Dieu pour sinon contrôler la nature, du moins prévenir sa menace. Cette forme de rapport se manifeste dans la langue elle-même. Dans la langue hébraïque et dans la langue arabe, il n'y a pas de séparation entre les mots et les choses. L'objet vit parce qu'il est nommé. (16)

On the level of linguistic and poetic expression, Kattan implies that semitic languages have an immediate power of evocation which the West cannot grasp or recreate because of its own preoccupation with modes of mediation. Kattan's notion of *le discours arabe* is obviously based on the same theory: what appears as unspeakable and implicit to the Western readers of his novels would have much clearer and more concrete significance for an Arab reader.

Kattan's approach to Semitic and European languages is open to challenge, as were the Romantic theories of the origin of languages, to say nothing of the 'Orientalist' vision embedded in it. I am not inclined to agree with Kattan's philosophy of languages. Nor do I think that these formulations explain his own style of writing. In other words, the remnants of Arabic rhetorical devices in his literary creations are not alone responsible for the barrier between Kattan and his readers. But I do find that they point towards an understanding of Kattan which is, unfortunately, only implicit in a few of his works.

Although in his essays and interviews Kattan proclaims that it is his Judeo-Islamic heritage which informs his writing, he does not fully articulate the extent to which this linguistic and cultural heritage is fragmented from within. Throughout *Adieu Babylone*, the protagonist speaks of linguistic exile in his own homeland. He may not feel alienated from his community, but even in the early days of his childhood his accent singles him out as a member of a minority. To belong, he must imitate the accent of his Muslim compatriots. That is to say, for the protagonist, as for the young Kattan, the most conventional form of speech becomes a mark of internal exile.

When Kattan assures us that he considers Arabic his mother tongue, we must understand the statement in its proper context. Not only did he learn Hebrew and Arabic simultaneously at school, but also he mastered the

transposition of the two. In this process, both languages are forced to undergo such transformations that ultimately they exist in complete neutrality. In fact, they create a new linguistic system.

In a chapter of *Adieu Babylone*, the narrator describes the use of Hebrew alphabet for writing Arabic (129). This cryptic language, *Suki*, creates a bridge between the two languages. At the same time, however, it empties both of their internal logic of significance. For the Jewish teenagers who are employed by Muslim officials to decipher documents written in *Suki*, the language offers a glimpse of power. Like the narrator, Kattan himself does not further reflect on this simultaneous process of mutilation and conflation. But his sensitivity to the emptied-out medium surfaces in one of his short stories, "Le Gardien de l'alphabet."

The protagonist of this story, Ali Souleyman, leaves his homeland, Turkey, at the time of Atatürk's reforms, to find support for the preservation of the sacred alphabet of his language. He believes that the Latin script which has been chosen to replace Arabic threatens the very identity of his nation. Ironically, his convictions take him increasingly further away from his own land. He reaches total exile in Edmonton where he diligently rewrites new texts in the old alphabet. His zeal gradually robs him of his original goal; he copies and catalogues texts without ever reading them.

Like the protagonist of *Adieu Babylone*, Ali Souleyman is estranged from the language he desperately wants to preserve. When he approaches Arab scholars for support, they ridicule his accent in Arabic and dismiss his proposals for change. Both protagonists suffer from a cultural alienation which is rooted in their medium of communication. The mother tongue itself is a vehicle for fragmentation of the self. In "Le Gardien de l'alphabet," this linguistic disorientation is accompanied with physical exile. The more fervent Ali Souleyman becomes in the preservation of his alphabet, the further he is removed from his own language and culture.

This analysis can also be extended to Kattan's own situation of the permanent migrant. Like the characters of his fictional works, he too is alienated from his mother tongue. In his interview with Allard, Kattan narrates an episode which is symptomatic of his linguistic dilemma:

Il y a deux ans, il y a un Musulman, en Israël, qui a lu *Adieu Babylone* et a décidé d'en traduire un chapitre en arabe. Il l'a fait et me l'a envoyé après. Et j'ai lu *Adieu Babylone* qui se passe dans un pays arabe traduit en arabe. Ça été une expérience très dure et très étrange. Dure tout de même parce que je ne m'y suis pas reconnu, écrit dans ma langue maternelle. (Allard 16)

The impossibility of recognizing himself in Arabic points back to the linguistic void in which Kattan has maintained his mother tongue. It would be interesting to examine Kattan's reaction to a French translation of one

of his Arabic short stories. No such experiment has been done, but it is likely that he would once again fail to recognize himself in translation, for he can only feel at home in a language when its signifying system is challenged from within. What he resists is the possibility of being firmly placed in one linguistic system — that of the empty shell being filled in: "J'ai opté pour une langue que j'invente à chaque moment. J'ai choisi un lieu que je dote de présence en y inscrivant mon invention" (*Le Réel* 188).

French in Canada has provided Kattan with the type of continuous linguistic conflict he has come to know intimately and which he has manipulated into an art. As he concludes in *Le Réel et le théâtral*, he can only survive on the border, not within, given languages and cultures: "Si j'accepte d'être un homme partagé entre la communion et l'attente c'est que je rejette la division de l'être, je refuse de vivre simultanément dans deux mondes" (188).

Kattan may not be torn between two cultural spheres, he certainly does not seem so in Canada, but he is a man who has forever lost his orientation. Or more accurately, he has made disorientation a conviction: "Je n'accepte pas la fixité des lieux sûrs et le confort des certitudes" (*Le Réel* 188). In Canada, Kattan has carved out an image for himself — that of "le gardien de l'alphabet." But that image is deliberately open-ended. Like the empty alphabet, one may read into it anything one wants.

As a man of letters, Kattan brings to Canada an archetypal example of the marginal refusing to be integrated into the whole and striving to undermine the stability of the entire system. Kattan has not yet succeeded in creating a Canadian equivalent to *Suki*. In the first part of this paper I referred to certain detrimental effects of literary and linguistic interference; it should be clear from my discussion, however, that were Kattan to fully develop this Canadian *Suki*, these effects would not appear detrimental. Were he to realize this challenge in a systematic manner, he would perhaps exercise far greater influence on the Canadian literary institution than he does now as the director of the writer's division of the Canada Council

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Some Notes Towards the Writing of a History of the Ukrainian Literary Institution in Canada

On 30 December 1898 an Alberta-Ukrainian farmer named Ivan Zbura composed a 111-line poem titled "Kanadiiski emigranty" (Canadian emigrants). Written in simple rhymes, it celebrated the superiority of life in the New World over that in the Old Country, where the peasant's lot was said to be 'as bitter as horse-radish.' When the poem subsequently appeared two months later in the Jersey City newspaper, *Svoboda* (Liberty), it simultaneously announced the birth of a Canadian poetry written in Ukrainian, and the sprouting of an overseas branch of Ukrainian belles-lettres.¹

Although Ivan Zbura never seriously pursued his literary inclinations, his lead was soon followed by other aspiring Ukrainian writers in Canada. In 1900 the short story "Z hlybyny propasty" (From the Depths of the Abyss), by Sava Chernetsky, became the inaugural work of immigrant prose-fiction, while a decade later the first indigenous plays were written for the Ukrainian Canadian stage by Jacob Maydannik and Ivan Bodrug. By that time, pioneer Ukrainian authors were well on the way to establishing one of Canada's most vigorous and enduring ethnic literatures, which is now, somewhat amazingly, entering its ninth consecutive decade as a New World cultural phenomenon.

- 1 See the fragment reproduced in Slavutych, Y. ed. *Antolohiia ukrains'koi poezii v Kanady*, 1898-1972. A partial translation can also be found in Yar Slavutych's essay, "Expectations and Reality in Ukrainian Pioneer Writing," *Identifications: Ethnicity and the Writer in Canada* ed. J. Balan, 15. It is suggested in the above article that Father Nestor Dmytriw's fictionalized sketches about the life of Ukrainian-Canadian pioneers — printed in the United States in 1897 under the title *Kanadiiska Rus'* (*Canadian Rus'*) — should be considered to have inaugurated Ukrainian writing in Canada. However, since the author was an American resident on a visit to this country, his prose narratives more properly belong to those works about Canada by Ukrainians.