

The Political Syntax of the Absentees

Translator's afterword to "Stella Maris" by Elias Khoury

Stella Maris is the follow-up novel to *Children of the Ghetto: My Name is Adam*), but the two novels can be read out of sequence seeing, as they do not follow a linear narrative. Each is made up of multiple layers of space and time, entwined with the history and biography of Adam Dannun as it moves in a time machine-like fashion between past and future, and parallel worlds.

In *Children of the Ghetto*, we meet Adam in the 2000s; a Palestinian man in the latter years of his life as he sets out to relate a first person account of his memories of the ghetto of Al-Lydd. Adam lives in NYC and leads a life devoid of the present day, which seems to fade into memory immediately as it takes place. He finds himself trapped between a predetermined future and a past that will not let him rest – until finally, all those ghosts and demons that have been clawing away at his caged off world, lead to his death in a scene akin to Palestinian poet, Rashid Hussein's death/suicide by a burning cigarette in his bed.

Adam leaves behind notebooks in which he chronicles his tales, based on childhood stories he had heard back in the ghetto of Al-Lydd. His notes are a patchwork of fact and fiction; stories, lists and musings that do not come together to form a single, coherent narrative and which conclude in silence.

"I wrote so much, only to discover that silence is more eloquent than words and that I want these words to be burnt." (*Children of the Ghetto*, English version, pp. 24-25, translator: Humphrey Davies). The silence Adam had opted for (or rather, the silence that had opted for Adam) is not necessarily the absence of speech per se but rather, a language of hidden layers, which boasts a full range of modes and avenues of expression. Silence, whatever form it assumes – whether Hebrew or Arabic – articulates the impasse he has come to, as well

as his inability to see his story through to conclusion, coherently and in the first person.

Children of the Ghetto tackles the two endpoints of a man's life story; his early childhood and autumn years; however, it does omit the main chunk of the biography. *Stella Maris*, meanwhile, is Adam's bildungsroman; his coming-of-age story which seeks to fill in that blank. It takes us back to an earlier time in his life, shining a new light on that already predetermined ending. The story, for the most part, is set in 1960s Haifa and establishes the main trajectory of Adam's biography; from early socialization to his teenage years, the discovery of sexuality, his time at university, his political uncertainties, and journey of introspection that concludes in a rebirth. The novel features scenes of Haifa life, exposing all forms of trickery employed in Haifa-themed literature, and chronicling the interplay of identities of a young Palestinian living in the Jewish state. In 1963, aged only 15, Adam leaves his mother's home after she marries a man who is not his father, embarking on a convoluted journey in the course of which he will have to don a mask which by slipping on, will find him betraying the expectations of those around him, time and time again. By sheer coincidence, somewhere between Nazareth and Haifa, he crosses paths with Gabriel, a Jewish garage owner who sees an uncanny resemblance between Adam and his late brother who was killed in the war. Gabriel offers Adam a job in his garage, sets him up in an abandoned flat in Wadi Salib, and arranges for him to be transferred to a Jewish high school. Adam falls in love with Rivka, Gabriel's daughter, but when the latter finds out about their affair, he is apoplectic with the Arab's betrayal and throws him out into the street. Adam leaves Wadi Salib and moves on to live in a Wadi Nisnas bakery. In the process, he enrolls in Haifa University's department of Hebrew Literature. The world of literature opens Adam up to brand new horizons. Those lead him, along with his Literature professor – in what is yet another peculiar coincidence – to a historic encounter with Marek Edelman; one of the leaders of the Warsaw

Ghetto uprising. These coincidences, along with others set off a chain of events as a snowball of revelations and betrayals ultimately leads Adam to uncover a family secret that will upend his whole biography.

In *Stella Maris* Adam ostensibly waives his right to speak; bequeathing it instead to an unseen and unknown third person. Therein lies the key to reading this novel which begins with the question of this mystery third person narrator's identity (In Arabic, this particular pronoun – “dameer” -- also means conscience and moral compunction) who has assumed speaking duties on Adam's behalf. Could it be Adam himself who has shed his ability to embrace the “I” form? That is to say, the capacity for existing as a sovereign subject. Is he pretending? Disguising himself as a third person narrator? Is it that Adam has split up into two separate characters; both of whom go by ‘Adam’? “one who would be the present Adam and one who would be the absent Adam.” *Stella Maris*, p. 14); or rather, could the implied author have stripped him of the reins and passed them on to a fellow absentee, on (the post-hoc) account of his spectacular narrative failure in the autumn of his life, as described in *Children of the Ghetto*?

The novel begins with a series of back-to-back linguistic and meta-literary questions: how can the absentees possibly write about a space and time from which they are removed? Do the absentees rely on those who have experienced, and who recall those events in the first person? What happens to the first person narrator when they are stripped of their story that is then handed over to that illusive third person presence? This last question which ties into grammatical pronouns, takes on both a spatial and corporeal meaning when Adam has his first encounter with a dead man – his friend, Ibrahim who was killed whilst playing football, after being hit in the chest by a ball. Adam looks at the body lying on the pyre and watches on as the soul departs the body as it is transformed into an anonymous corpse, and how his friend's painfully familiar features become a yellowing mask that has lost the name of its owner. This is how literature (the

narrator's identity), grammar (the pronouns) and the corporeal reality (the body that loses its name on becoming a corpse) all come together to form a literary-political infrastructure in order to rethink not only the coined phrase, "present absentees" that has taken residence in Israeli law, but also the political syntax of those missing in action.

However, relocating the narrator's position from first to third person (especially if those are in fact two sides of the same, now-cloven Adam) does not make him any more coherent or clearer. Already on the first page of *Stella Maris*, the narrator reveals how Adam was given the Wadi Salib flat by Gabriel as a gift for his 16th birthday; a highly improbable scenario, seeing as how Adam was an Arab worker at the garage whose owner is Jewish. In this case, the translator's kneejerk reaction is to 'touch up' this assertion in the name of maintaining the narrative's credibility. In one instance, Rabah, the guard at Benjamin Gardens, turns to Adam in Hebrew and asks him in the following Arabic transliteration: 'Atta Yehudim?' ("Is you Jews?") Here too, one's immediate impulse is to correct the grammar. However, the further one gets through the novel, a possibility emerges that these slip-ups may not actually be Khoury's but rather, the absent narrator's who is not as well versed in the facts and whose Hebrew is clunky. Yet again, the translator finds themselves at a crossroads; do they correct these inconsistencies or leave them untouched? Whatever the verdict, is of course dependent on their advance ruling as to the narrator's degree of credibility. If the translator finds themselves early on, already tempted to tweak and touch-up the text as seen in the aforementioned examples, the later stages paint a much bigger picture and with it, follows the conclusion that what we have before us is likely a weak, hesitant, and sometimes limited narrator.

Literature has provided us with several modes of unreliability that is the product of the narrating witness's cognitive limitations or age (like Faulkner's Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury*, or Salinger's Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*); their inability to make

sense of an otherwise vague reality (like the four narrators in Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's *Rashomon*); an act of deceit (like with Ian McEwan's Briony Tallis in *Atonement*), or a particular strain of narrator naiveté (like Winston Groom's titular character, Forrest Gump.) Hebrew literature too is not without its unreliable narrator archetypes; see Agnon's Tirza in *In the Prime of her Life* or Amos Oz's Hannah Gonen in *My Michael*. In these cases, the reason for the narrator's unreliability was her limited, dissociated consciousness that is unintelligible to her – whilst behind her back, a higher, informing authority emerges which suggests her limitations to us, the readers.

It seems, on the face of it, that in *Stella Maris*, at the heart of the narrator's unreliability is a fundamental lack of knowledge that is the result of their absence and spatial and chronological distance from those events which the passage of time has inevitably charged with an array of new meanings. In this case, "touching up" the source text no longer remains a viable option and one must exercise a greater degree of sensitivity if they are to retain some degree of the unreliable narrator's position and resist whatever temptation there is to revise and correct them.

I've had the privilege of having regular contact with the author and during one of our conversations, whilst I was sharing with him some thoughts I'd been having on the matter of the flat Adam had allegedly been gifted, he insisted that the narrator's claim remain as is. Bit by bit, I came to realize that this was no random oversight but rather, the implied, or absent narrator's literary strategy whose meanings gradually come to light as one makes their way through the novel.

One's distrust of the narrator's credibility only deepens when the latter invades the recounted event in order to remind the readers of the story's time and setting – not to mention the very fact of his own existence. For instance, when he is required to tell the story of

Adam's 1964 trip to the Warsaw Ghetto, he writes (*Stella Maris*, p. 222):

The narrator has the right to ask himself as he is telling the story, why is he in fact revisiting this trip to Warsaw, and why is he stuttering, losing his wits and realizing that he can write no more?

The narrator excuses knowledge gaps by arguing that Adam himself is as confused and therefore, cannot recall the exact reasons that had prompted him to embark on this journey. He describes one's loss of control of their ability to narrate and in doing so, exposes the seams at the very fabric of the narrative tale, and its handicaps:

Stories do not conclude when the author wishes it so. Neither when he puts a full stop to paper over his inability to keep track of things, nor when he wants his story to become a question mark in his readers' minds. When the author concludes his tale, it only means that the writing may now wash over the book cover and beyond, en route to its desired destination. (*Stella Maris*, p. 307)

Even when describing Adam's encounter with Carma, the narrator apologizes to his readers by way of a meta-literary discussion which hints at opportunities missed over his inability to narrate. He begins, (*Stella Maris*, p. 394-5):

Carma's story is extraordinary by any stretch of the imagination and is the stuff detective novels are made of. Unfortunately, though, detective stories aren't exactly a staple of the Arab novel tradition. You may come across the odd one, here and there, however they do not rise to the caliber of the true

detective novels like the ones written by Agatha Christie and which boast a rationale so razor-sharp, one would almost think it was based on the most mind-boggling mathematical equations.

The magnitude of Carma's story will remain suspended, in a similar, detective story-like fashion even though it could very well have been the first Arab novel of this genre. Nevertheless, the author of these lines shall unfold it [his narrative – YS] in a way devoid of any suspense.

Elsewhere, after Adam says goodbye to his professor, slamming the door behind him, the outraged narrator insists that a farewell scene ought not to be described in such a melodramatic fashion. According to him, the description would be far more apt for a play or film. In novels, he argues, things never hit a peak as melodramatic as this.

The narrator's unreliability further stands out in some of the other characters' reactions in the novel, including Adam himself. For instance, when describing Adam's feelings of loneliness in Haifa, he reminds the readers how Adam would get lost in Haifa's alleyways and explains how he had lost the sense of security he once had, living in the ghetto. In order to undercut the narrator's authority, the implied author (or, the first Adam) brings in none other than Adam himself (or, the second Adam). (*Stella Maris*, p. 170):

Adam read the line, "the sense of security he had, living in the ghetto," and laughed at the author of those words; the same, unseen third person presence hiding in their own absence to conjure up Adam's childhood memory. The words sounded like they were someone else's childhood recollections. How very dare the memory describe the days of the Al-Lydd Ghetto as a time of security?

The novel is littered with innuendoes of this kind which, time and time again, betray the instability of the story that cannot stand as a properly “stitched together” narrative, whilst shining a light on the absent narrator’s inability to tell a fully coherent tale. He tricks, stumbles and errs, unable to clarify the events’ ontological status; sometimes he leads readers to false insights into the inner workings of Adam’s consciousness and is preoccupied with matters of representation and genres that allegedly pull him away from any narrative cohesiveness. When the narrator is required to recall the stories of the Galilee villages, wiped out in 1948, and weave them all into a single, reliable integrative framework, he ends up instead bemoaning the polyphony of both narrators and narratives (*Stella Maris*, p. 341):

Stories of Umm al-Zinat and Siban, like all other wiped out villages, stretch out to no end. No author shall ever be able to fully encompass them. They come undone as the wounds on a smashed-up body do.

This does not discredit the stories of the Nakba. To the contrary it provides it with greater credibility by adding multiple (Palestinian) voices. The polyphony and plays on narratology make the language of the novel all the more vibrant and in doing so, enable the articulation of that many more hitherto muted voices.

However, it appears that above all else, the narrator comments on the failure to grapple with the unfolding narrative’s temporal intricacy, which may explain why the two novels, *Stella Maris* and *Children of the Ghetto* share no chronological order. The narrator writes (*Stella Maris*, p. 308):

The logic of the narrative dictates that every story must have its predecessor and successor. And when one is involved in writing, one must bow down to the tempest of story cycles that

do not conclude only so they could then start anew. What critics have dubbed a 'peak' is nowhere to be found in the story you are telling, for it is more likely to have taken place in the one that had predated it, or in the story that will succeed it. The closer one gets to these stories, the more they will come to realize that what they are doing is painting endless parallel mirrors and giving in to the allure of this illusory world that will not allow you a way out of its labyrinthine landscape.

The text's space-time perception has a formidable impact on the way its translations were tackled; also as it warrants a specific grammatical inflection that captures the action's perfect, or alternatively, imperfect nature. For instance, the attempt by those living in the past perfect tense (made refugees in 1948) to tell this story in the present continuous. Opting for the present continuous as opposed to the past perfect is far more than just a grammatical proclivity, but rather a political choice demonstrating how, from the absentee's spatial point of view, the present is missing as it articulates the physical rift from space, and the removal of all markers of time from it. To give presence is a political act on the one hand and at the same time, an articulation of the challenge that is the very prospect of such an act. Therein lies the trap one faces in their attempt to stabilize the absentees' grammatical and political syntax.

With and without the matter of the absent person's credibility, the *Stella Maris* narrator frequently opts for counterfactual thoughts – in defiance of reality – which point to a variety of possible versions of many events – “an infinity of parallel mirrors” reminiscent of Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths*. In this vein, Khoury outlines an array of possibilities, imagined in a polyphony of voices, and which indicate a multitude of authorities speaking in one's own emotional theatre.

For instance, when Adam says goodbye to his mother, he was expecting her to call out to him and ask him to stay. The narrator recalls this scenario in seven different versions supposedly going through Adams's head, with each standing as a would-be draft of its predecessor. In one instance, he envisages her holding his hand and shedding some tears; the second time, he imagines taking his father's photo from her before taking off; the third version has her yanking the rucksack out of his hand, taking out Hassan's photo and holding it close to her chest; a fourth version sees her grabbing him by the shoulder, looking into his eyes and announcing she's taking off with him; in a fifth iteration, she stands in front of him, blocking his exit; a sixth version finds her whilst holding his hand, reminding him that he must not forget she is his mother and that she would love him until her dying day; and finally, in the seventh account, she collapses and faints and he must lean down and rouse her awake with his kisses. This is how the narrator produces multiple, would-be versions of the same event that enable the narrative to take wholly different turns in parallel worlds. These versions are organised in a polyphony of genres and on a steadily-rising sentimental scale that reaches its climax in the operatic melodrama that was the mother fainting and Adam having to kiss her awake. The imagined episodes seem like an assortment of never-realised possibilities, which only further aggravates the sense of affront that accompanied this goodbye.

Similarly, when the professor asks Adam to accompany him on the trip to Warsaw, Adam considers telling him that he is in fact an Arab. According to the narrator's version of events, Adam imagines this confessional scene endless times. He pictures the professor overcome with rage and demanding to know why he had lied to him. At the same time, he also conjures up a polar opposite scene in which the professor embraces him and admits considering him a stepbrother. He goes over scores of scenarios only to eventually never come clean to the professor. The existence of multiple versions deepens the narrator's identification with Adam's innermost yearnings

whilst at the same time, further cementing the impression that the story in its initial account, had in fact taken place.

Counterfactual scenarios and episodes are not exclusive to the narrative and may very well occur in the historic reality to which it alludes. One evening, back when he was still in the middle of writing *Stella Maris*, Khoury called me and asked when the trips to Poland actually began. I told him that to my knowledge, they started back in the 1980s, which he promptly dismissed. “Could they have started in the sixties?” he enquired. “Adam recalls going with a delegation to visit the Warsaw Ghetto.” I immediately told him that that would be highly unlikely, seeing as in 1965 there were no such trips to Poland; however, after a brief rummage through the archives, I came to realize that Adam was in fact telling the truth. Between 1963-1965, three delegations were sent over to visit the Warsaw Ghetto; a project hatched by ghetto survivor, Fredka Mazia. And so, Mazia would later emerge as a (marginal) character in the novel. Whilst in this case, mimesis came out triumphant over logical likelihood, the novel in other instances features additional counterfactual recurrences that circumvent not only narrative reality but also the historical one. For example, towards the end of the novel, a conversation is described between Adam and Abu al-Khajar, the Palestinian who had immigrated to the US in his youth and who later went to Princeton where in 1948, he met Albert Einstein whom he may have encouraged to speak up against the Deir Yassin massacre. This counterfactual prospect arises in an *Ars poetica* discussion between Abu al-Khajar (a self-proclaimed “bastard child of coincidence”) and Adam. Abu al-Khajar asks Adam (*Stella Maris*, p. 457):

“Why are you asking me all these questions? Don’t tell me you want to write a story about me.”

“I don’t write stories.”

“You’re lying. But I will ask you this; if you do end up writing about me, then could you please leave out the Einstein bit? Mostly

because no one's going to believe it. They'll take you for a fibber."

"But is it or isn't it a true story?"

"Of course it's bloody true, but people; they don't believe the truth."

Is it or isn't it, then? Is it a historical possibility that did actually come to pass or rather, no more than a narrator's flight of fancy? The reader could just the same wonder whether Adam's encounter with Marek Edelman is but another version of a counter-reality prospect or an event that did in fact take place within the framework of the novel's narrative "reality." According to the narrator's account, it is genuinely a true story, based on the most peculiar coincidence that had occurred at the University's Department of Hebrew Literature. The phrase "coincidence" explicitly recurs a number of times in the course of the novel. The coincidence that is the convergence of events without any clear causative link between them is enabled by the sudden, abrupt cutting between time and space. This is how, for instance, Adam's encounter with his professor ends up being described as an odd coincidence. His crossing paths with auto-shop owner, Gabriel somewhere in between Haifa and Nazareth is also labelled a coincidence. Not to mention the mysterious dentist he also happens to meet by chance, who is said to "turn this coincidence into something fate-like." (*Stella Maris*, p. 418). In this episode, which offers Adam the potential to reread his entire earlier biography, the coincidence is the product of a hidden kinship.

The novel also explores a number of counterfactual avenues with regards to Hebrew literature itself as it carries on building additional narrative worlds and parallel mirrors. The chapter, *The Lovers of Haifa*, presents an alternate world to that created in A.B. Yehoshua's *The Lover*. In a carnivalesque way, Khoury inverts signs, representations and names, flipping them on their heads in a polyphonic game of timelines and roles. Palestinian worker, Naim, who can recite Israel's poet laureate, Bialik's *In the City of Slaughter*

becomes Adam who is studying Hebrew Literature; Adam who owns the Jewish-run garage, turns into Gabriel, whilst Gabriel himself who owns the vintage Morris car, becomes Hebrew author Menachem Zecharia who is at the garage, looking for an Arab informant so that he may start work on his novel. In this literary exercise, Khoury not only reconceives *The Lover's* garage scene but in his play on timelines, is also ahead of the narrating time. He relocates the scene to the early 1960s, a time when Yehoshua was writing *Facing the Forests* where for the first time, the Palestinian's muteness is put into words in the most coherent way possible, "The Arab turns out to be old and mute. His tongue was cut out during the war. By one of them or one of us; does it matter? Who knows what the last words were that stuck in his throat?"¹

Khoury flips the script in an ironic conversation between author, Menachem Zechariah and Adam about the choices a writer faces. (*Stella Maris*, p. 115):

"Now, my friend, you've discovered your protagonist. Start with the hatred you saw all over the Arabs' faces and write about your Arab protagonist."

"No, uh-uh. I need a different protagonist. I need him to be nice, and not so crass when he talks."

"Do you want a mute protagonist or what? Everyone talks like that. That's if they do talk."

"Mute?" Menachem asked.

"That's right ... A lot of them either became mute or are claiming to be mute."

"A mute protagonist! Why the hell not? That's an incredible idea you've just given me. You're actually pretty smart, kid. [...]"

¹A.B. Yehoshua, *The collected Stories*. Translation: Marsha Pomerantz. Syracuse University Press, 1998, p. 210

In this reimagining of *The Lover*, Khoury drags the author into the narrative, turning him into a character in the novel who is forced to confront the characters he himself has created, and the limitations of his own story. Here too, Khoury stretches out the linguistic metaphor whilst examining its material and corporeal aspect. The mute character in *Stella Maris* takes Hebrew literature to task for describing his tongue as having been 'severed':

"No! No!" the mute man cried out, shaking his head right and left as he stuck out a long tongue in evidence that no man had in fact severed his tongue. (p.102)

Khoury ultimately presents us with a double, political-literary move: he summons the absentee and allows them to give their testimony which exposes the seams that hold together the very fabric of Hebrew literature, only to enlighten us by the end of this turn on his own shortcomings as narrator.

Khoury throws curve balls not only the narrator but also the translator with his use of complex meta-linguistic techniques or by making meta-translative interjections, which present the translator with several dilemmas that are not limited to their understanding of the Arabic source text or the way in which it is adapted to Hebrew. For instance, in one of the scenes where Adam professes his love for Rivka, he quotes an Arab love poem, "I am yuzidni al-wirdu illa 'atashan" (p. 128). Adam struggles to translate the line to Hebrew and when failing to find an appropriate parallel, decides to abandon the poem's translation altogether. Should the translator then translate the poem to Hebrew after all, or are they to leave it in its Arabic version, as unintelligible to the monoglot readers as it is to Rivka? In this instance, I opted to leave the poem in its Arabic version, transliterated

in Hebrew without any translation, and even added a note in the text which follows the same meta-translative register, indicating that the translator also chose to leave the line untranslated. In doing so, I was attempting to not only stay true to Adam's decision but to also make the translator a flesh and blood presence; a figure with a theoretical, cultural, and political agenda thus breaking with a tradition in which the translator' dons a proverbial invisibility cloak with the aim of producing a text so transparent, one would never know it is in fact a translation. Uncloaking the hidden-absent translator and making them present in the text articulates the reality that translators do have an agenda that mediates the novel's transition from Arabic into Hebrew, and which is their ethical responsibility to reveal.

The idiosyncrasies of Arabic are heightened by Khoury's in-depth foray into language. Every so often, he will stop and turn to meta-linguistic terminology that demarcates how words, grammar and syntax ultimately all fall short. The novel's intense preoccupation with language and even more so, language's language (meta-language) forms a long and winding road, littered with linguistic, semantic and discursive bumps and obstacles which make the recreation of the novel in Hebrew all the more challenging. In one of the scenes, Adam lists to his girlfriend, Dalia, a total of twenty synonyms to the word "love," found in the Arab dictionary (Hawa, maḥabba, ṣababa, huyam, shawq, etc. all the way to twenty.) These are in fact the result of an act of translation within language itself. An attempt to endow each of these words with meaning via the dictionary results in a "dictionary's loop" for the semantic fields in which they exist do not overlap between the two languages, nor do they follow any form of hierarchy in Hebrew or Arabic. There is no way of breaking this cyclical pattern without taking some arbitrary decision seeing as every choice made leads to a simultaneous excess and lack. One's only remaining option is to transliterate the Arabic words into Hebrew, and to decide arbitrarily what their Hebrew markers will be.

He translated to Dalia the twenty scenarios through which love passes, as described by the Arabs; however, he remained unsure as to the exact meaning of the words, for translating words of love to other languages is not possible, as love itself defies translation. He therefore decided arbitrarily whether the 'ṣababa' is the portal into the 'huyam,' and whether the 'huyam' is the peak of love, or if it is in fact the other way around (p. 429).

The semantic fields where these words exist do not overlap between the different languages, however as it turns out, nor do they overlap within their own languages which makes the translation task that much more complicated, seeing as this multiplicity begets both excess and lack at the same time. This multi-layered linguistic structure is embedded in the very art of translation and mandates a re-examination of one's loyalties to the national habitus and its lexicons, for the number of synonyms for love in Hebrew at the translator's disposal pales in comparison to their equivalents in Arabic. The following line for instance, is not a clear-cut translation of the source text: "[...] from passion onto entertainment, from yelp to lust, from affection to desire."

In this formation, from a substitute of the original – that is to say, the thing standing in for it – the translation becomes a meta-text placed alongside the source text and often, further illuminating it. After all, Khoury himself does not believe the source text's own stability and time and again, allows one to reflect on the narrator's ultimate (in)ability to tell the story.

Adam regretted telling Dalia his Abu Hassan al-Hajar story as the story seemed to have quite a few holes in it. In order to salvage the story, he had to come up with several romantic tales about the old man, and to say things that had not been said by him [...]

(p. 447)

This mode of reflexivity peaks when the character of Elias Khoury appears in the novel (“Lebanese writer and author of *Bab el-Shams*”) and the implied author then undermines Khoury’s own reliability, suggesting an alleged hidden agenda:

The Lebanese author spoke with tremendous confidence, never even conceiving that every story will always have another story preceding it and that the narrator cannot genuinely tell a story, unless he leads us to those narratives hiding behind his own.
(p. 261)

Adam the narrator also challenges Elias Khoury’s reliability in *Children of the Ghetto*; branding him a fibber, portraying him as lacking in knowledge and understanding of the Palestinian narrative, and as someone who has twisted *Bab el-Shams* narrator, Khalil Ayoub’s words. Here, we revisit the following question: is this Adam playing tricks on the readers and adopting the third person form after having split up in two, in order to undermine the author and Khoury’s credibility? And if that be the case, then how will he opt to address us in the trilogy’s third part, currently being written? Will he remain silent, as he had been at the end of his life as described in *Children of the Ghetto*? Will he anoint another absentee as the narrator of his story? Or will he actually set off on a quest to find Khalil Ayoub, Lord only knows wherever he’s hiding, so that he may decipher the political syntax of the absentees?

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