jls Journal of Levantine Studies Vol. 9 No. 1, Summer 2019, pp. 19-38

Dialogue with Elias Khoury on Literature and Translation

Interlocutors: Raef Zreik, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, and Yehouda Shenhav-Shahrabani
Date: December 1, 2018
Location: The Kreisky Center, Vienna
Host: Gertraud Auer Borea d'Olmo, Secretary General, Bruno Kreisky Forum
Recording: Lena Campostrini
Transcription: Duygu Atlas

We met in cold, snowy Vienna for a dialogue with Elias Khoury, the renowned Lebanese writer, professor of literature, editor, and essayist. Our conversation included topics such as world literature, Arabic and Hebrew literatures, and translation. Khoury's works have been translated and published internationally in Catalan, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Norwegian, Spanish, Romanian, Swedish, and Hebrew. Khoury has a prominent place among Israeli readers. Of his fourteen novels, six have been translated into Hebrew—including the Palestinian epics *Gate of the Sun* (2002) and *Children of the Ghetto* (2018)—and his most recent work, *Stella Maris* (part 2 of *Children of the Ghetto*), is currently being translated into Hebrew.

Raz-Krakotzkin: I would like to begin with a general question. You are speaking about the crisis in the Arab world and the role of literature in the process of decolonization and the creation of new languages. I was thinking in that respect about *Children of the Ghetto*, which was recently translated into Hebrew. When I think about the shift from Arabic to Hebrew, I can understand what decolonization means as far as I'm concerned. I'm an Israeli who reads himself

through the translation of your novel into Hebrew. What about the other way around: How does it affect you to write about Israelis in Arabic?

Khoury: Actually, there are two books that I wanted to have translated into Hebrew immediately: Gate of the Sun [Bab al-Shams] and Children of the Ghetto. The first translation of Gate of the Sun was published simultaneously in French and in Hebrew. The first translation of Children of the Ghetto was in Hebrew before French and English. For me it was very important—not because I wanted Israelis to read about the Nakba. That was not the issue. It was an act of love. I think literature is an act of love. This is why, when I'm asked to describe *Gate of the Sun* or *Children of the Ghetto*, I say they are love stories. Love can be tough. Love is not only to accept the other but also to tell the truth. In this sense, I wanted it to be translated into Hebrew. To go beyond making a bridge, to try to incorporate this Jewish experience in the literature of the Palestinian Nakba. I think that the literature of the Nakba is a humanistic literature and it is large enough to incorporate all the pains and can create this wonderful but very tough relationship between silence and language.

Raz-Krakotzkin: Is silence the language of decolonization?

Khoury: We can innovate a language through the silence of the victims. In the sequel novel, *Stella Maris*, Dalia asks Adam about his ongoing silence and his writer's block. He says that any writing about the Nakba creates a kind of cemetery of words. Dalia is amazed because it reminds her of Borges's library, which is replaced here by a cemetery. Adam is careful and says that only the blind can write in depth, like Borges, or like Abu al-ʿAlaʿ al-Maʿarri. At the end of the discussion, Dalia tells him that he is not the blind author but the mute author, since Israeli writers, particularly Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua, amputated the Palestinian tongue.

Zreik: So, is this the end of language?

Khoury: When I say crisis, I refer also to the crisis of the language. It makes writing a tough issue, nearly impossible. In ten years' time, some historians—working with official documents—might find out that the Syrian government blames the insurgents instead of blaming the dictator. The only way to go beyond this

history is through literature. I'm not only speaking about the Arab world, but the region, or maybe the world as a whole. We should not leave history in the hands of the historians alone. Here is where literature and writers come in. To write a historical moment is to write literature. This is the role of literature in times of crisis. When we were young in the 1970s, with this revolution of postmodernism and so on, the whole idea was that we had to explode language. Actually, I think this moment in which we live is the moment of correcting language. Not in the sense of political correctness, nor grammatical. No. Language that is an expression of human experience.

Raz-Krakotzkin: How did the language lose it? I mean, how can you distinguish language from the human experience?

Khoury: Everybody used to speak, for example, about the era of the image. Now images are so played out that they could be anything. Nobody believes images anymore. The only place where I feel that new language is created is in literature. Novels. It is the place where you can re-give meaning to things.

Zreik: Do you mean language as a reservoir of values?

Khoury: In literature, I'm not talking to anybody, but to language itself. You are dialoguing with language. You were asking about the audience. When I write, I do not really care about the audience. Of course, when the book is out, I'm happy if people read it and so on. But while writing, it's another story.

Raz-Krakotzkin: When do you write?

Khoury: At home in the morning, early in the morning. Six o'clock in the morning. It doesn't mean that I write every day. Every day I sit for four, five hours. And most of the time, I don't write.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: What about your weekly articles in *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, or your editing work in the *Journal of Palestinian Studies*?

Khoury: That is not in the morning. My mornings are only for my novels. It's four, five hours every day. I read, try to think. But it's all for the novel.

Raz-Krakotzkin: Is research part of what you call writing? Because you do a lot of research.

Khoury: No, no, there is research before writing—which was done before I began the whole thing. Now, while writing, you discover that there are many unexpected things that you have to know in detail. So you add research during the time of writing. But the major research is done before. For example, I did not think about the settlements in the West Bank when I started writing the trilogy of *Children of the Ghetto*. But it popped up. It emerged on its own terms in the middle of the third volume.

Zreik: Because that is the reality?

Khoury: Because if you want to speak about those living in Nablus today, for example, you need to go through the settlements. Nablus now is Nablus plus settlements.

Raz-Krakotzkin: So you do not have the full structure of the book before you write.

Khoury: I know that I have a very big story. The frames. The characters. I know them. I knew, for example, that Adam would speak a lot about the ghetto and then would go to Haifa, and then he would immigrate to New York City, etc. Now, when I was writing the second volume, I realized that the third volume must be about Khalil Ayoub, who was in Nablus, who was part of the Palestinian establishment. Then I realized that to speak about Khalil I had to visit the settlements, in order to understand the West Bank. It is not only corruption, colonization, etc.—this discourse is correct, and we have to say that. But it's not the entire story. To get the whole story, you have to let things develop.

Raz-Krakotzkin: And this becomes part of the Nakba literature?

Khoury: The reinvention of Palestinian language began with literature before 1948. When we look back, looking at the Palestinian literary experience—for example, the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish—we notice that it is very humble.

But in fact it was the time when experience created a new language, not only for the Palestinian reader but also for Arab culture.

> Waddah al-Yaman's greatness, however, lies in his ability to transcend the clamour of words and reveal the eloquence of silence. This is why he died in the cruel way that he did, proclaiming silence as the highest level of speech because it holds within it the eloquence of life, which exceeds in its expressive capacity any rhetorical form that language can devise. (*Children of the Ghetto*, 42)
>
> He was an enthralling speaker, and his ability to switch between Arabic and English was amazing. He approached the podium with hesitant steps, but as soon as he'd taken his place there, with his dark glasses, he was transformed into a combination of Taha Hussein and Edward Said. The blind man's hesitancy disappeared, to be replaced by an absolute command of the language. He began by speaking about the city of Lydda, in which he had lived until he was twenty-five, saying that the tragedy of Lydda had taught him how to read the silence of victims, and he said that Mahmoud Darwish's poetry was fashioned from the gaps of silence that provide the foundations for the rhythms of the meanings. (*Children of the Ghetto*, 118)

Shenhav-Shahrabani: Going back to your argument about silence, what does it mean to give a lecture about silence, as Ma'moun did in *Children of the Ghetto*? What does it mean both materially and metaphorically?

Khoury: Ma'moun is giving another reading of Mahmoud Darwish. The dominant reading of Mahmoud Darwish is that he says everything but actually leaves gaps of silence. If we do not understand these gaps of silence, we do not understand the profound meaning of the poem. I think this is why Mahmoud Darwish is a great poet, because from this gap he can always be born anew. From his silences in the text. Great poetry is reinvented every time you read it.

Zreik: You are not speaking about silence between poems; it is the silence within the poems. It is not about those subjects that you mention in the poem. It is when you expect in the poem to meet something and then you stumble

upon absence in the poem itself, which is an absence that is constitutive of the poem.

Khoury: Let us look at things in a different way. Eighth-century writer Ibn al-Muqaffa‘ is considered to be the first Arab writer to write prose literature. And he would say that the literary text can be perceived in two ways. It is like a nut: you can play with it like a small ball, but if you break it down, then you come to the essence. So literature has these two levels all the time. There's the outer covering, which everybody will love or people will like because it's nice, because it's round, it's whatever. And then when you break it down you arrive at the essence. Then there is something totally unexpected. Take Mahmoud Darwish's last poem, "I Don't Want This Poem to End" [لا أريد لهذه القصيدة أن تنتهي] . You find a kind of a summary of all of Darwish's work. But what is inside it, which is not said, is this relationship between presence and absence, life and death, this is the silence of this wonderful poem, total silence. Actually when I read it for the first time, I said: "My God, what is this? What is Mahmoud trying to do here?" Then you reread it and discover that between the gaps of the structure, there is a whole history of Arabic literature, of standing before the ruins, of making the rules speak. In this sense, there is another level beneath the poem, which you have to discover. We can find this in all poetry, I mean not only Mahmoud. I think that all great poetry is like this. But in Mahmoud Darwish's case it is profound, because his poetry is mingled with the Nakba. Actually, without "Why Did You Leave the Horse Alone?" [لماذا تركت الحصان وحيدًا?], there is no Nakba. The Nakba is not there. You feel it beneath the words; it is that which is not said that the poem says in an oblique way.

When I was working on *Gate of the Sun*, I went especially to Paris. Because there was a big chapter on al-Birwa, Darwish's village that was totally destroyed in 1948. I wanted to ask him about it. I began telling him what is not said in his poetry. I was trying to give him another reading, of things that are not in the text itself. This is the hypothesis, which I think can be applied to the ways in which we can read the Nakba.

Raz-Krakotzkin: What is the relation you mention between Mahmoud Darwish and your literature? Those who read Mahmoud Darwish read him somehow differently than you mention now. For example, in *Children of the Ghetto*

you go in search of Adam's silence. You start with Adam as a person. And apparently he knows you and does not like you. [*Khoury laughs.*] How do you find the silence in the ghetto? The story is by definition a story about literature and politics. So are you trying to follow poetry and fill the gaps, or would you say it differently?

Khoury: Exactly. My relationship with Mahmoud's poetry is very profound. First, we were very close friends. And we worked together. Like all literary friendships, I followed the way he found this first voice of resistance, the collective voice, etc. Then the way he developed to become a universal poet who made the Palestinian tragedy a way to understand the human tragedy. It was also the way I developed as a writer. I remember it very well when I published *The Little Mountain* [الجبل الصغير] in 1977. It is a novel about the civil war, and the novel is told in a very problematic way. It is not the dominant political language. And I remember that when Mahmoud read it, and we were discussing it, we were trying to find common denominators about the relationship between politics and literature. That is, literature should not accept the dominant discourse or the dominant imagery. The literary must go and discover the reality that is beneath things. So there is a huge relationship in this sense. And Mahmoud is there all the time. In *Stella Maris* there is a Jewish Iraqi professor, a communist, who takes Adam to a poetry reading of Mahmoud Darwish in Kafr Yasif. And he reads a section from "Write Down! I Am an Arab" [سجِّل! أنا عربي] and Adam does not like it at all. He does not want to say, "I am an Arab." With time, however, he discovers that it is a metaphor that leads to the profound human questions of the human soul in our time. Obviously, when Adam reads Mahmoud Darwish, there will be another Mahmoud Darwish. In the sense that in literature we complete each other. In literature, you do not invent things out of nothing. And Mahmoud never wrote things the way I write them. I went to meet him because a friend called me, saying, "Come to Paris, he's dying." He was losing consciousness, and in that critical moment, lying on his deathbed, he spoke to me in detail about *Gate of the Sun*.

From left to right: Yehouda Shenhav-Shahrabani, Elias Khoury, and Raef Zreik. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin does not appear in the photo, but certainly he was there.

Raz-Krakotzkin: I want to go back to the point you just mentioned about writing as a kind of experience. That you have only a basic framework and you develop it as you write the novel, and I want to bring you back first to the question of literature as an act of love. Writing as an act of love. An act of love to whom? Because paradoxically here, the act of love is of course to Adam himself, even though he is ambivalent toward you from the beginning. It is not only him. It is not only the love of the victim, it is the love of the victim and through the love of the victim, you are getting to recognize, to learn, to acknowledge different figures. What does it mean to you, this act of love?

Khoury: I cannot do anything profoundly without love. Love is the primary engine that makes us live. I think a moment without love is a waste. Now, in *Children of the Ghetto* I loved Adam, of course, I loved Ma'moun, but I was in love with Manal. I am still in love with this woman. I mean to say that I am

searching for her. Amazingly, when I was writing *Yalo* [يالو] something like that happened to me. Yalo is a rapist, a bad guy. In the beginning, I was thinking of this character as bad, but I ended up loving him. And we became friends. Otherwise, I could not continue writing.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: And for that purpose, you studied Aramaic.

Khoury: Yes, I studied Aramaic. Without knowing his mother tongue, I would not have been able to understand him. Otherwise, I could not continue writing. Now, in *Children of the Ghetto*, I love my characters. Actually, I love them all. But of course there are different levels of love and ways of love. Love opens your language and fills your lungs with oxygen. For me, I cannot write if I do not love. In the case of Adam, actually, of course Adam does not like me at all. But there was no reason for me not to fall in love with Manal. Now if I love Manal, I have to love him.

Raz-Krakotzkin: Why doesn't Adam love you? That is also a question. Because you disturb him. And love is disturbance. Because he has a problem with love.

Khoury: He dislikes me. That does not mean he does not love me. He dislikes me because he loves me. And because he hated the fact that I was the one who wrote the story of the Nakba instead of him. If I love Manal, I am going to have to love Adam. If I love Adam, I have to love Dalia. If I love Dalia, I have to love her grandfather. Dalia's trying to make a film about her grandfather's experience in the Warsaw Ghetto. So love is something that opens the possibilities of telling. This does not mean that I do not have a position. You can love, and you can still keep your dedication to the idea of justice.

Zreik: Justice sometimes requires anger.

Khoury: Love is also anger. In love there is anger.

Zreik: No, in love there is anger, but in anger there is not necessarily love. We can be angry with people. That is not personal; that is mediated love. I love human beings, humanity, in the sense that whatever is human is not strange to me. But that in itself can actually stand in the way of politics. Because politics at one point is a suspension of love. It's the momentary suspension of love,

momentary clash. It is not an annihilation; it is not total enmity. But it is a clash within a human horizon, not a clash of annihilation. So I think there is a difference in this sense.

Raz-Krakotzkin: But "I do not hate you" does not really give you literature. I think you're talking about different points of literature. Because in politics you cannot love everybody. You also have the language for politics that does not talk about love. What is an act of love? The act of translating. This is exactly what Yehouda used to say when he was translating your novels. You fall in love; you follow the story and trust it even when you do not know what is going to happen. I think the word is correct.

Zreik: I can imagine why love is relevant, because love allows you a certain intimacy with the feelings and complexity and the fragility of others whom you do not agree with probably on anything, without the closeness that literature requires. You dig under their skin or put yourself in their position, feel their feelings, go into their heads, feel their pulse.

Khoury: Love of the characters. Not everybody mentioned is a character in the novel, even if they have different layers of personality. For example, in *Stella Maris* I mention Martin Buber, when he speaks about the creation of the settlement on the destroyed houses of Deir Yassin. He wrote a letter to Ben-Gurion. Buber is not a character in my novel. He is only mentioned. In essence, he did not enter the novel. But those who enter and stay—they enter the space of love.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: I want to come back for a moment to translation. Today translation is perceived as standing alone, as if it has to replace the original. But that is not a dialogue with the author. I think one of the ideas of translation as a dialogue is not to replace the original but to let it stand next to the original in a dialogue. But modern translation is about erasing the source, trying to become the source.

Khoury: I think this is the genius of translation: to give the text that comes from another cultural background its place in a different culture, thus changing the receiving culture while trying to appropriate it. Edward Said worked on Conrad and quoted all these innovations in English. So the moment you enter

a language, you enter with your other language. Languages are open, and in any language there are layers of another language. When I speak Arabic, when I think in Arabic, using the Lebanese or Palestinian dialect, I discover that I am also speaking Aramaic. At least 25 percent of our words are Aramaic.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: And in the case of Adam, Raef, you seem to be . . .

Zreik: No, I'm enjoying this actually. [*All laugh.*] I think it is going in a certain direction from the point of view of the Hebrew language. In the conversation, there is always some translation, carrying over, or transcendence. And this is the mood.

Raz-Krakotzkin: In what sense?

Zreik: Do not be mistaken. I am fully on board in this conversation, enjoying it and listening to it. No. It is just the positioning. I experience myself too much in Arabic in this conversation. That the conversation with Elias is a conversation within the language.

Raz-Krakotzkin: It brings us back to the Arab reader. You are writing in Arabic and do not have an Arab reader in mind. But the question is what is lost in the translation.

Zreik: But some things are not lost in the translation.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: But this is exactly the point of knowing, of not imitating the source. The translation stands on its own. This is exactly what I meant earlier by the translation standing next to the original and not replacing it. Because when you replace it, you try to iron it. Ironing does not work here. And I think this is a very important point, because when Frost said that poetry is what is lost in translation, somebody responded that poetry is what is left of translation. That is, the other way around, and both are right. Both are right because this is exactly the point—that they do not fully mimic each other.

Zreik: I do not know. Probably poetry is lost in translation. I cannot see poetry without the playfulness of language. I mean, by definition it is lost in language.

Speaking of what is lost and what remains. Because what remains is the logos and the idea. But poetry is not logos and idea. It is exactly this excess; something that always escapes the colony of the idea, of the concept, when you try to translate that playfulness of language. The playfulness of language is always at the heart of poetry. That is why Said also said that philology is associated with humanism. Philology opens the text to a multiplicity of meanings, and this endless opening is at the heart of humanism. Poetry—and in this sense what you write is poetry, it is a novel but a poetical novel—is always an unfinished project. It's not that you open it, read it, and get that sense or meaning of it and you are done. That sense or meaning is always delayed. The meaning reveals itself in installments, gradually. Like a Russian doll, it is endless. You open and you open and then you open again. . . So is the poetical text, you peel it and peel it again in endless search for meaning, and the more you peel it the thicker the meaning becomes.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: It might be the other way around. When Adam leaves his mother's home in Haifa, and he takes what's left of his father's will, she tells him that they do not own anything but words. In *Children of the Ghetto* you describe a dead language, which people are chewing in their mouths, but it remains silent. But words, as it turns out, are sometimes heard and can create things in the world. I can think about the politics of *Gate of the Sun*, and the settlement by that name that was established in the so-called E1 area in January 2013 by Palestinians. Which is an amazing thing, how literature captures the political moment and becomes a source of creativity. In that context, I'm thinking about your preoccupation with language and words. It seems like there is ambivalence toward our words here.

Khoury: Words are ambivalent because they shift meanings according to the situation, and according to the speakers. Literature is different from other discourses because it relies sometimes on the shades of words. And indeed, in certain situations you chew the words to the nth degree, because they are shades of words. Things become meaningless. In another time, words give life. The creator chooses between words and shades, between silence and voice, etc. In *Stella Maris*, Adam visits Auschwitz and the Warsaw Ghetto.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: You described it "as if he were walking on words."

Khoury: Correct, here I am not trying to repeat the story of the Holocaust. It is written. I am trying to understand its impact today, when you walk around the Warsaw Ghetto. That is what I felt when I went there. I felt the emptiness. And even Auschwitz, which turned out to be death tourism. But underneath this tourism, you go profound. You discover—not as an Arab, or as a Palestinian, or as a Jew, but as a human being—the meaning of the sentence "I am the last man." I'm searching for this last man. And this last man you can find everywhere. He is inside everyone.

Raz-Krakotzkin: And what do you mean by that? Adam is also the last one.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: Or the first.

Raz-Krakotzkin: Or the first, which is the same. Of course, Adam is the first. But in the novel itself, he's also the last. And Adam, our grandfather, who was in both the Old Testament and the Qur'an, he was both.

Khoury: *Adama*, which is land and man. And in Arabic Adam comes from *adeem* (أَدِيم), which is the land. In the Qur'an it says, "He was called Adam. He was taken from the earth of the land." So if you are the last man, actually you are the first man. Practically, Adam was the first man of the ghetto, but also he is supposedly, in the concept of the whole novel, the last man. Through shedding light upon his experience in the ghetto—the Palestinian ghetto—he is trying to destroy all ghettos. His profound human experience can find its place as the place that can invite others to visit. When Adam is studying at the university, his professor challenges the state of Hebrew literature and questions its ability to write lamentations and eulogies. Can Modern Hebrew literature write eulogies and lamentations? When we speak about eulogies, we speak about death. When we speak about writing, we are speaking about birth. How do these two coexist? My effort throughout the novel was to listen to Adam, even when he was silent.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: I wanted to ask you something that has been bugging me since I read it. I've just started to translate *Stella Maris*. And the beginning is very compelling because what you do there is a profound language game. In *Children of the Ghetto* the narrator, Adam, is telling the story in the first

person, and here the story is told in the third person. In Arabic, the third person is like a hidden conscience. It is called *dameer al-gha'ib* (ضمير الغائب), "the absent conscience."

> The question that irks the writer of this story is: how do the absentees write? Can the absentee tell his story in the first person, writing as someone who remembers, or should he turn to a third person, who will write the story in his stead?
> The play of the third-person pronouns in Arabic grammar, called the absentee pronouns, is unusual and has no parallel in other languages. The word that replaces a personal pronoun is called *dameer*, a linguistic expression that in Arabic also means conscience and moral compunction. So how can novelists write in the third person (when the conscience—*dameer*—is absent)?
> And what does it mean for the conscience to become absent, when the story is to be told in the third person? (English translation: p. 41 of this issue; *Stella Maris*, 14, Arabic version)

Khoury: I agree with the absent conscience. It is the voice of the absent. In the first volume, Adam was trying to speak and failed. Actually, he was telling us his memory through the words of his mother. And in the second volume, he tries to shift to a third voice because he realizes that he is a "present absent." So he is trying to write about himself in the third person. He is trying to write about himself as the hero of the novel and as if he were absent. It is an attempt to show how he realized his absence. It is not a satire. He is very sincere.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: Let us try, Elias, to connect between three issues. First, you are playful in *Children of the Ghetto* and raise issues related to Arabic grammar—past and present, which is connected to what you label the "continuous Nakba." Second, there is in *Stella Maris* a shift in voice from first to third person, which is, as you said, a question of grammar and morality of the present absent. Third, you have an issue with the Jewish Diaspora [*galut*]. You say that the Jewish Diaspora cannot absorb the Palestinians, and you suggest the other way around. You absorb the Jews into the Palestinian story. How would you link these seemingly unrelated issues?

Khoury: Actually, when I was writing the novel, I had in mind Amnon's article on the rejection of the Diaspora and the Nakba. Amnon's hypothesis is that both Darwish and Said are the representatives of the concept of exile now. In this sense, here we also find not only Mahmoud Darwish but my literary friends, who are part of this process of appropriating the exile as an existential condition. Because this novel is the diary of literature, meaning it's a novel about literature. Now, Adam is very lonely. He left his mother in the house. He finds himself alone. First, he was thinking about becoming a Jew. Practically, he was a stranger, even when he meets the Arabs who work in the garage. In the first meeting, they don't understand why this Arab is coming to take their jobs. He understands that the only way to survive is to become a Jew. This is why when he goes to the ghetto, to Warsaw, to Auschwitz, there is a big scandal. Because he goes there as a Jew. His professor believes he was originally from Warsaw, and all hell breaks loose when they go to meet Marek Edelman. The professor tells Edelman that Adam is from the ghetto, and Edelman responds with surprise, saying: I do not think I heard this name. I don't think there was a Jew in Poland whose name was Danoun. At that moment the professor understands that Adam is an Arab. The professor is very angry with Adam because he pretended to be a Jew. But Adam did not pretend he came from the Warsaw Ghetto. He was indeed from the ghetto of al-Lydd. Adam, for his part, felt that Marek Edelman could be his father. He was a hero and led the uprising in the ghetto like his imagined father. By the way, I went to Warsaw and searched for Edelman's grave.

Raz-Krakotzkin: We need Edelman to think about Palestine, in order to narrate Palestine. You do not want to deny the Holocaust, but to bring it back in order to have a place for the memory of the ghetto. You therefore have to go to Lodz, where he lived, or to Warsaw, where he was buried.

Khoury: This is one point. The other point is that I want to speak about the Holocaust in Arabic. I went to Warsaw because I was invited when my book came out in Polish. And there I decided to visit the ghetto, then I went to Auschwitz. I went to Krakow. And then I discovered Edelman. And then I bought his book in English. Edelman is a hero. He stayed in the ghetto all the way until the end and did not commit suicide. When Adam asks him why he did not commit suicide like Mordechai Anielewicz, Edelman says that suicide is a great metaphor, but we do not die to make great metaphors.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: In *Children of the Ghetto* you emphasize time and again the phrase "like sheep to the slaughter," for example, in the case of Abba Kovner.

Khoury: In Edelman's speech he said it is more heroic to go to slaughter like sheep and to dig your own tomb than to take a gun and fight. It is much more courageous than to take a gun and fight. You do not feel death. "Here I go to death." And the essential thing is to defend the dignity of your death. This is the beauty of how literary work takes you to the shadows and shades of language and so on. These will lead you to places you never imagined before. But I'm not a philosopher, I'm just a writer. But it takes you to places where you realize what I call the essence of life. This is also in *Stella Maris*.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: I'm in the midst of translating *Stella Maris* now, and I did not get to that place yet. As you know, I don't read the novel all the way through, but translate as I read the novel. I develop my relationships with the characters as I go along. I'm in suspense both in terms of curiosity and in terms of the feelings I develop toward the characters.

Khoury: What you're doing, Yehouda, is something very interesting. I don't know if I would do it like that. But as an experience, I don't know any other translator who works like that. You're in a process of translating as if you were creating, reading or writing. What you're doing here is as if you were an author. You're the real author. And you accept the nuances of feelings, and when they change, they will really change in your translation. Unlike the omnipresent writer, you don't know everything in advance. But this is also my position as a writer. I write the novel as I go along. I become the author only when I finish.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: If I may, here is an example. In the beginning of *Stella Maris*, just an example, it says that Adam got the house in Wadi al-Salib from Gabriel as a gift for his sixteenth birthday. It didn't make sense to me. It is very unlikely that he would give him a house as a gift. I wanted to revise it in the translation. It made me uncomfortable. Only later did I realize it was a parody. That he was given a place to sleep, and that Gabriel paid bribes to silence the night watchman who looked after the houses of the Palestinians in the wadi. He only let him live there for a while. I have to go back now and revise the beginning.

Khoury: Because for Adam, the thing was that he gave him the house. For someone like Adam, first of all he was sleeping in Ginat Binyamin, and then he was still in the garage, to find himself in a huge apartment with four bedrooms, with the keys. It's a gift. *Halas*, he has a house! He felt that he got a house. This is why in the end, when Mamdouh comes and tells him to leave the house, he refuses. All these nuances, small stories and small nuances will create all these vibrations that lead us slowly to discover their personalities. Because really, in the beginning, I didn't know what was going to happen. I was in suspense too.

Zreik: And what if he didn't listen to you?

Khoury: That can happen. Adam was in love. I really didn't want him to make love to the Jewish girl, because I was suspicious that his motives were different. Then I realized that for him it was an act of love. When Mamdouh came and asked him "What are you doing with this girl?" he said, "I want to marry her." He was only sixteen and said, "Yes, I'm serious. I love her." The personality develops. It really astonished me the way he behaved. I did not want him to go through all those ordeals.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: When I started to read *Stella Maris*, I had a déjà-vu. I had the feeling I'd read this story before. I wasn't sure. Maybe you told me this was going to happen. Then I realized that you rewrote the scene from *The Lover*, by A. B. Yehoshua. I was astonished by the way you wrote back into Hebrew literature. You interfere with Hebrew literature. You are not only a receiver of that literature, but you write into that literature. I also noticed that you transfer the story from the mid-1970s to the early 1960s. And even the game of names. Adam was the owner of the garage back there. And Gabriel with the flat cap became Nahum Zacharia, etc.

Khoury: This novel is about the way novels are rewritten. I rewrote Kanafani. Why not rewrite Yehoshua? The approach is to incorporate and reinterpret, and putting the other in your story is one way to create a deep dialogue. Adam was not mute like Khalil and Aziz in *My Michael* and was not a naïve kid like Naim in *The Lover*. He was a real lover, a human being trying to survive, and collecting his life from the ruins of the Nakba.

Raz-Krakotzkin: That brings us to the issue of decolonization in literature. We can talk about it from two different points, but I want to ask you about your point of view. For us, Hebrew readers, the Hebrew version of the book brings us the process of decolonization, in the sense that we have to look at ourselves through your eyes. It does so maybe in Arabic. But unfortunately, in Hebrew, it transforms everything. We have to look at ourselves, even if we know things. For me, personally, even though I knew about the events, it's a process of decolonization. Because it's one thing to say there was a massacre here, and another thing when the victim tells you about it. I assume that you cannot make love with the soldiers there. You attempt to understand them, not to understand their deed. And you're doing something else. You're talking about your relationship with Hebrew literature that is also a process of decolonization. You take this literature and decolonize it. But in what sense does it affect you? It was not written for translation, right? Its main readers are Arab readers. Most importantly, when you take an Israeli writer, what are you doing to their Hebrew literature?

Khoury: First, it is about all literature, not only Hebrew literature. I think the act of writing in a way is an act of rewriting. Literature is the most profound product of human life. Religion was born in poetry, religion was born in literature. That is, all the human values were born in the literary mimesis.

Raz-Krakotzkin: Stories existed before religion.

Khoury: Yes, of course. Religion is a story. Religion was created by the story, not the story by religion. That is why I think dialoguing with literature is dialoguing with ourselves, with our conscious and our unconscious, with our history and our prehistory, and so on. Of course, I don't necessarily write for Arab readers, but I write in Arabic. But I am writing in Arabic not to Arabs but to myself, and through me to everybody who will read it. And when you're in a language, you have to have a profound dialogue with that language. With the history of the language, with the meanings of the words in that language, you have to play with the language in order to read the language clearly. This is the major dialogue. Now, on the other hand, one of the first items of the modern Arabic novel was a dialogue with the European West. From Tawfiq al-Hakim's novel *A Sparrow from the East* [عصفور من الشرق] or Suhayl Idris's *The*

Latin Quarter [الحي اللاتيني] or Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* [موسم الهجرة إلى الشمال], it's a dialogue with Kuchuk Hanem, the famous Egyptian dancer, the way it was presented by Flaubert. As I read this dialogue, which made the European woman a metaphor, I thought this is not a dialogue. In order to enter a dialogue, you have to dialogue with literature. With European literature. Not with the image of the woman—that is to imitate Flaubert. Edward Said wrote a very good chapter on that. So, I discovered that Flaubert's letter about Kuchuk Hanem was translated into Arabic in 1920 and published in *Al Makshouf* magazine. And I think the Arab writers were under the influence of Flaubert.

Raz-Krakotzkin: Can you clarify? You are talking about Flaubert and you are talking about imitating Flaubert. What would be a dialogue that includes the writing, the literature, and the books of those writers imitating him in that way?

Khoury: Lebanese critic Maher Jarrar wrote a long text about my novel *As Though She Were Sleeping* [كأنها نائمة]. And he read the novel as a dialogue with Madame Bovary, although the character had nothing to do with Madame Bovary. So you have to dialogue with literature. And in my relationship with Hebrew, the Old Testament, Song of Solomon, Saul's or David's hymns, or the lamentations of Jeremiah, these are great literary works. I don't care if Solomon was Jewish or Turkish. It's meaningless. It's meaningless if Hamlet is in Denmark or England. The problem with modern Israeli literature is you cannot dialogue with it on that level.

Zreik: On which level?

Khoury: That is, to forget the national context, as you can do with Solomon, or with Hamlet or with Flaubert. Its literature is still trying to play games with French existentialism. So when you dialogue, you're pushing this literature to uncover, which is to decolonize. And I don't know what the actual effect on these writers will be, very small if any. But you bet on the idea that literature affects literature with time. It affects language with time. And it will change the language and then it will change literature. But I'm not stupid enough to think I'm making a revolution for tomorrow.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: We are finished, but the dialogue is incomplete. This conversation should be continued. But for the time being, we're done. We'll transcribe this and we'll send it to you to see. Because there are areas of silences here. [*Laughs.*] We are not going to be loyal to the camera only . . .

Khoury: Like translation.

Shenhav-Shahrabani: Like translation. [*All laugh.*]