
At the Borders of Identity: Greek and Arabic Fiction and the Impossible Beyond

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That the principle of identity is false, even in art, is an insight which can be gained only in the process of aesthetic reflection, more precisely at the point where the autonomy of art is exposed as depending on its opposite other.

Theodor Adorno
Aesthetic Theory

THE LINGUISTIC ORIGINS OF THE WORD "IDENTITY" ARE OBSCURE, lost in the mists of the fifth century A.D. when the term first begins to appear in Latin.¹ Nonetheless, identity, in spite of its peculiar and irregular formation, is constituted from the root "idem" — that is, the same or, the same over and over again. And it is precisely this root meaning of identity as repeatable sameness, as being the self-same and not other, that I would like to explore for a moment. For it is just this formulation, inherent to the notion(s) of identity, that is so suggestively problematic. This definition of identity as repeatable sameness, as the consistently self-same and no other, is only an arguably useful, though admittedly dominant, way to organize thought and action. These days, identity is most typically evoked as a negative and critical category, as a mode of resistance, as an assertion of counter identity, as, in other words, a kind of counter hegemony. That counter-hegemonic practical and intellectual organization is as cultural as it is political and social. And one of the kinds of organization which identity fosters is the literary, and here the fictional narrative in particular.

An essential premise of early modern bourgeois narratives — novel,

¹In *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology* of Martianus Capella (fl. A.D. 425).

journal, and essay — as of the concomittant rise of industrial capitalism, was precisely that notion of the identifiable, the repeatedly self-same-and-no-other individual as the focal point of the narrative (as it was of the economic system). Daniel Defoe's character of Robinson Crusoe is surely one of the premier monuments in such a literary map of identity. The character of Crusoe as a literary convention is the convenient locus for a complex series of perceptions, observations, and actions all of which are based on the assumption that Crusoe is who he is and no other. Framed by the first-person narrative, everything in the novel is presented as (presumably) irrevocably other to Crusoe. Literally everything that Crusoe encounters *on* his almost deserted island and, perhaps even more significantly, *off* of it is there as something *against* which he defines himself. Having accomplished this scarcely inconsequential task of distinguishing what he is and what everything else — man, animal, plant, or mineral — is *not*, Crusoe then proceeds to engage in the most unabashed domination of that which is not he, of that which is other to him. (There is a sense in which even Crusoe's own spiritual and psychological conditions are submitted to a similar process of evaluation and cataloguing for the purposes of better self-control or domination.) The implication is none too discreet. The assertion of Crusoe's particular self-same identity, however convenient a focal point or narrative convention it might be, facilitates his hegemonic dominance of the world around him. But if Crusoe is a literary example of the textual manufacture of self-same identity, that identity is essentially contradictory. For Crusoe's textual identity is only available in juxtaposition to and domination of that which he is not. Crusoe, as a sign for self-sufficient sameness, is not self-sufficient at all. In fact, he is only very tenuously the same. The first-person narrative construction of Crusoe's identity is irrevocably infiltrated by those things which are presumably other to him. In order to construct his narrative identity and dominate his narrative as he struggles to dominate the natural world around him, Crusoe is absolutely dependent on that which he is not. It is in this context that Adorno's comment on identity is pertinent — in spite of his obvious privileging of "aesthetic reflection." The principle of identity as self-sameness, as a repeatably distinct entity, is undermined by the reliance of the self's definition on that which it is not, on the "other." In spite of this contradiction, the simple multiplication of such individual identity presumably produces familial, tribal, ethnic, social, and national identity. And the converse of this arithmetical operation, the process of division rather than multiplication, presumably returns us to the smallest component of collective identity — the individual. But whether we postulate individual identity or collective identity as the point of origin, the process and its logical bases

are quite the same. There presumably is a self-same and repeatable identity. Formal logic formulates this proposition as $A = A$ — the copula "is" being, at least for logic, a suspect and undefinable term. Crusoe = Crusoe. The English = the English. Now, at this point, the bulky ghost of the Hegel of *Phenomenology of the Spirit* should rise from the grave to counter such a notion of self-sufficient identity. For Hegel, no less than for Adorno, identity is impossible without its opposite or other — (non)identity. Or, to return to Crusoe as an example, the identity of Crusoe is impossible without the patriarchal family whose authority and order he violates — regretfully, if most profitably, as Crusoe himself repeatedly informs us. The identity of Crusoe is impossible without the absolute otherness of the Brazilians, the Moors, the slave boy Khouri, the Protestant God, the nature of the Carribean island on which he is shipwrecked, the "cannibals" and that most essential other that Crusoe christens Friday — all of whom Crusoe separates from himself and then dominates and exploits.

Identity, then, is something rather more than a natural or given essence, something more than an unquestionable "fact" of life. It is a most ideological proposition about life, essence, and nature. It is an instructive comment on Louis Althusser's often-cited definition of ideology as the representation of our imaginary relationships to (real) conditions of existence² of the "identity" that is the assigned topic here is a notion shot through with the "imaginary" and its multiple representations — whence the significance of the link to the second part of that topic, literature. Having said that, let me also say that to locate the notion of "identity" within the ideological is not to reject or discard it. But it is most definitely to qualify it. It is to suggest that identity is *not* a natural and self-evident entity, singular and sufficient unto itself. It is not singular, monolithic, fixed; that (phallic) notion of identity demands historicization, a "critical reading." And if identity or, more properly, identities are a creator of wo/men, they are also created by them. We shape and are shaped by them. For identities are just that — multiple and indelibly marked by gender, race, class, and ethnocultural situation — rather than a self-same, or necessarily repeating and identical essence. It is, I would argue, more useful to consider identities as a way of seeing the past and our relations to it in the present, as a way of formulating and maintaining differences, opposition, and as the possibility of assuming power and autonomy in the present. Identities are situational, relative — and, at least potentially, oppositional.

²Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)," *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York, 1971), especially pp. 162-70.

In spite of this, however, the crucial role that the concept of a singular identity, especially in its Romantic variation, played in burgeoning European nationalism should not be overlooked in the present context. For, from Johann Herder to Matthew Arnold to Meir Kahane, the argument is remarkably and disturbingly similar. The demonstration of an "unquestionably" distinct and different identity justified the claim to political and/or state power. In the name of Herder's *volk* or Arnold's cultural elite or Kahane's chosen people, a self-same and repeatable cultural identity — individual identity writ large — was invoked to validate the claim to hegemonic power. A very similar delineation of national or ethnic or racial identity is still an organizing call for unified and collective effort in the consolidation of more recent cultures and states, as it was a crucial element in liberation from colonialism. But, as the narrative of Robinson Crusoe suggests literarily, this claim is not made in isolation. It is a claim relative to other claims of self-same identity. Thus, it is inextricably linked to considerations of power and hegemony. And hegemony, as Gramsci has suggested,³ is challenged and opposed by the ideological claims and political and cultural practices of counter-hegemony. Yet the notion of counter-hegemony is predicated on the hegemonic. But, at least potentially, counter-hegemony simultaneously holds forth the proposition of the anti-hegemonic. The counter-hegemonic and the anti-hegemonic are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they co-exist in tension with one another. But it is the postulation of anti-hegemony which allows counter-hegemony as something more than just a reversal of positions with hegemony. To return to Robinson Crusoe once again, opposition to the imperializing self-same identity of Crusoe is not simply to posit Friday in Crusoe's position (as attractive as that reversal might seem). It is to alter the hegemony of the structure on and through which Crusoe's identity is constituted and maintained. To posit identity as a fixed and "natural" essence is to attempt to exclude such structural change. But identity is not etymologically, politically, or literarily quite so self-evident.

Questioning of the category of identity has been included, in the last fifteen or twenty years, under the rubric of the decentered subject — even if the political, social, and literary implications of that particular questioning of the subject are not quite so clear or familiar. Contemporary challenges to identity and the subject are conventionally located in the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and the critical

³Antonio Gramsci, "Problems of History and Culture — The Intellectuals," *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and G. N. Smith (New York, 1971), pp. 12-13.

readings of Jacques Derrida and of what is somewhat erroneously called, after Derrida, the "school" of deconstruction. Some basis for paternity, no doubt, does rest with Lacan and Derrida. But the fallacy (or phallacy) of identity, of the self-same and repeatable subject, is not solely the child of contemporary French theory. Notions of self-evident, self-same identity are challenged, culturally and otherwise, by what have been designated (also after the French) the "second" and "third" worlds.⁴ In spite of numerous problems implicit in those designations, and in the concomitant formulation of "first" world, I would suggest that a critical challenge to modern notions of monolithic identity derives, in fact, from the resistance of the third world to the hegemony of the first. But the "first" world's questioning of its own notions of identity in response to a rising challenge in the "third" world is a larger topic than I can address here. In the present context, it is specifically the Palestinian and Greek literary questioning of notions of identity that I would like to explore for a moment.

If the questioning of the *romeiko* — of modern Greek identity — in *To Diplo Biblio* (*The Double Book*)⁵ by Dimitris Hatzis (1916-1980) was scandalous for the asking, the answers that Hatzis' text proposes are unquestionably scandalous. In *To Diplo Biblio* identity is problematized not only in the narrative of Costas, a Greek "guest worker" in Stuttgart who serves as a native informant of sorts for a Greek writer searching for the roots of the *romeiko*. Identity is also structurally problematized in the narrative voice(s) and perspective(s) of the novel. The narrative pretext of *To Diplo Biblio* is that the notebooks of the unnamed writer retelling the (hi)story of Costas' life fall into the hands of Costas himself. And it is Costas, then, who subsequently deciphers, rewrites, and amends the story of the novel's title — "the double book"; the book and its narrator are double ones (at least). And so *To Diplo Biblio* is clearly a self-conscious account of, a manual of sorts for, the production of the (post)modern novel. But the narrative subject — presumably Costas as some variation on the Lukacian representative type — is not simply double. He is triple or quintuple, a "multiple personality" — Deleuze and Guattari's schizophrenic before the word.⁶ Costas is, on the one hand, both the subject — the

⁴The designation of the "three worlds" originated in a newspaper article by Alfred Sauvy, a French demographer, in *L'Observateur*, August 14, 1952. See Peter Worsley, *The Three Worlds: Culture and World Development* (London, 1984), especially 306-15, for an insightful commentary on the implications of the notion — "three worlds."

⁵Dimitris Hatzis, *To Diplo Biblio* (Athens, 1976).

⁶Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem, H. Lane (Minneapolis, 1983), especially pp. 1-51.

writer — and the object — the written about — of the text. His story is impossible without the mediation of the Greek writer, the *syngrafeas*, in the text. But that story is equally impossible solely through the literary efforts of that *syngrafeas*. On the other hand though, Costas as both subject and object of his story is the cite and site of narrative understanding to the extent that he recognizes the transmutable boundaries of his own “identity.” But in this recognition of identity as provisional, relative, and ideological, Costas does not reject or cancel out identity. He is not subsumed into some universal category — a kind of Greek rendition of the Coca-Cola proclamation that “we are the world.” On the contrary, Costas remains a *khamalis*, a porter, a foreign “guest worker” in Germany. His co-workers are Spaniards, Turks, Yugoslavs — with whom he shares a similar “guest worker” status — as well as Germans, the “natural” inhabitants, the non-guest workers. It is from his position as a worker in the Aoutel factory, which manufactures automobile lights, that Costas, with the help of his friends, manufactures his own story, his identity. But that identity is not a fixed locus of nationally or ethnically defined meaning. Rather, it is criss-crossed with contradiction, with movement, with fluidity. Costas, like the *romeiko* of modern Greece, is not self-contained or self-sufficient and decidedly not the same over and over again as the novel’s remembering of Greek history clearly suggests. The insistence of the text is not that of the *syngrafeas*, the writer, in the text: to discover and define some quintessential modern Greek identity. The insistence of the text is to point at and beyond the national boundaries of one kind of collective identity, and to point at and beyond the opposition and potential reversal of hegemony and counter-hegemony. It is in these multiple contexts, across these multiple boundaries, that *To Diplo Biblio*’s dedication-in-conclusion moves. *To Diplo Biblio* is

For me. For those others, as we said. For hope. And what if it is and a little for Greece — why shouldn’t it be?

In the fiction of the Palestinian writer, Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972), and most especially in his short novel *Rijal fi al-shams* (*Men in the Sun*),⁷ the issue of Palestinian identity in exile is explored with a sharp and poignant lyricism. *Men in the Sun* is the narrative account of three Palestinian immigrants seeking to smuggle themselves into Kuwait to find work. The third-person narrative represents each of the Palestinians in turn firmly confined within the boundaries of the chapter

⁷Ghassan Kanafani, *Rijal fi al-shams* (Beirut, 1963).

that bears his name. And in terms of narrative content, those same characters are just as firmly confined within their individual memories and dreams. The “men in the sun” are isolated in their own narratives, structurally and metaphorically. To that isolation, there is only one conclusion in this text — death. The relationship here between character and narrative structure stands as an analog for the extra-textual relationship between subject and structure or history that clearly impinges on the notion of identity — in Hatzis’ *The Double Book*, or even Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. It is the relationship between human agency and that sense of history characterized in the opening of Marx’s *The 18th Brumaire* — which we make but not just as we please, not under circumstances of our own choosing. In *Rijal fi al-shams*, history past and present is deadly, is literally without a future, unless the individual and his or her context are radically re-defined. So, hardly coincidentally, in what is clearly a re-examination of notions of individual and collective identity, the novel begins with the story of a Palestinian peasant, Abū Qais — who is in search of work to support his family whom he has left behind in a refugee camp. Abū Qais is a member of that class which was and still is the bulwark of the Palestinian population. In the opening lines of the novel, as he lies on the banks of the Shatt al-Arab in Iraq, Abū Qais’ identity as a peasant proverbially close to the soil is immediately problematized. Close to the soil Abū Qais is — quite literally. As he lies face down on the moist earth, he thinks he hears the weary heart of the earth beating underneath his breast. His sensation of the throbbing heartbeat of the earth evokes memories of a friend in his village in Palestine. The memory of that friend evokes the memory of the 1948 war in which Palestine was lost. And the memory of that loss and the smell of the damp earth evokes the memory and fragrance of his wife’s hair after she has washed it with cold water. Here memory, loss, and desire are linked in a delicately lyric, if potentially explosive, chain. But, like the other two Palestinians who are shortly to become his companions on a journey across the desert, Abū Qais is as resolutely bounded by his memories as he is by the chapter in which he recalls them. The political activist ‘Assad and the young teen-ager Marwān are, in the chapters that follow, equally bound up in their own memories and desires. But for the two younger men, memory does and cannot include that of Palestine, for they are of the generations who have grown up in exile, in refugee camps and UNRWA lines. For all three of them, though, and for the fourth Palestinian — Abūl Khaizurān — who agrees to smuggle them into Kuwait in the empty water tank of a truck that he is driving, their individual memories and private hopes and dreams are insufficient in a circumscribed narrative present. (We might remember here the parallel insufficiency of

Costas to tell his own story and of the *syngrafeas* to write his own novel.) But, given the grossly distorted representations of the Palestinian people and their aspirations in the West, what is particularly compelling about *Rijāl fī al-shams* in that context is the novel's structural and thematic refusal of a narrowly national identity. *Rijāl fī al-shams* does not propose a reversal of categories or structural positions as a solution to the unbearable textual (and extra-textual) present of internal or foreign exile. The Palestinian identity of *Rijāl fī al-shams*, like the Greek identity of *To Diplo Biblio* is one marked — for lack of a better word — by “transnationalism.” It is an oppositional identity to be sure, but one in contradistinction to the origins of the very concept of “identity,” as it is in contradistinction to many contemporary literary or literal practices of identity. Identity in these two narratives is based on the premise of its historical violation, its necessary fabrication, its ideological creation — and on the assertion that we both shape and are shaped by our (multiple) identities.

If the oppositional response to hegemony, to the dominant culture of a dominant class, is counter-hegemony, the assertion of identity can also be, in a similar fashion, a counter-hegemonic postulation — *against* a dominant identity which does not afford adequate power, rights, and recognition to a not-dominant group. Emerging or redefined national, ethnic, or gender identity can be contextualized as a response to hegemony — foreign and colonial or neocolonial; local, national, and elitist; or foreign, local, or familial and patriarchal. But counter-hegemony can also be simultaneously construed as an oppositional hegemony which points beyond itself, a hegemony which points at and, thus, beyond its own limitations and contradictions. Otherwise, it is scarcely useful as a critical stance or category. For counter-hegemony, by definition, necessarily operates on the terrain of hegemonic culture. Gramsci's point was precisely that it is not only state power that must be seized. But then, seizing power is not necessarily redefining that power. And it is this “pointing at and beyond” to structural redefinition and reformulation that the notion of counter-hegemony suggests. For the replacement of hegemonic culture by a potentially hegemonic counter-hegemony does not necessarily alter the terrain, or the relationships on that terrain, of power and culture.

Thus, I would suggest that the consideration of a radicalized concept of identity that points beyond its own borders, that prefigures its own demise as it is presently constituted, has been and continues to be a crucial textual topic — one evident both structurally and thematically — in the “dispossessed” and “marginal” literature of the “borders.” That is the impossible proposition of this paper's title. It is the trans-national, trans-ethnic construct suggested if only arguably

represented in Hatzis' *To Diplo Biblio* or Kanafani's *Rijāl fī al-shams*. It is counter-hegemony that also suggests the possibility of anti-hegemony, rather than of trading places with hegemony, and rather than of reversing the relationships of dominance with the Object in the Subject position. Whether the equation is $A = A$ or $B = B$, the proposition, the underpinnings, and implications of those equations are identical. And they are neat, efficient, and clearly defined. But they are also circular, self-defeating, and contradictory. It is not just a new definition of identity that the narratives of Hatzis or Kanafani propose. It is an identity which is plural rather than singular and monolithic, which utopically struggles to include rather than exclude or repress difference, which recognizes that borders and boundaries exist, perhaps even necessarily, but also that they can be and continually *are* crossed over.