"The Scent of Oranges and Yellow Calicotome Flowers" In Anton Shammas' *Arabesques*

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At around the time of publication, in 1986, of his masterpiece, the novel *Arabesques*,[1] Anton Shammas, the Palestinian-Israeli author wondered: "Can language replace the scent of the orchards lingering in the nostrils of a refugee, running for his life in 1948? Can language substitute, however modestly, for a homeland?"[2] This was the question Shammas launched at a conference on "Literature and Exile" in 1986, in a bid to salvage at least a fraction of the experience of the lost homeland, by trying to capture smell in words, something so elusive and at the same time concrete and absorbing, a "real" essence which can in one breath "revive" something gone and vanished. Alongside this poetic-linguistic effort, Shammas realized he was no longer able to live as a refugee in his own land. Even though a novel he had written in a supple, arabesque Hebrew, unattempted by anyone prior to himself, a novel he considered as distinctly Israeli, was about to be published, Israel, by defining itself a Jewish rather than an Israeli state including all its citizens, was excluding him.

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"Wardah! Wardah!" is a call that echoes throughout the novel: it is a routine warning issued before a planned explosion so that people will clear the immediate surroundings.[3] *Arabesques* in fact, and time and again, sounds this warning of an impending explosion which will cause both heart and tale to collapse. Local traditions tell that right at the center of Fassuta, the village in which Anton Shammas grew up, there is a hidden cave, dating back to the Crusaders, which conceals a golden treasure. The Djinnis have put the rooster Ar-Rasad, who loses a feather once every seventy years, in charge of the cave. This warning of explosion, repeatedly sounded throughout the novel, holds narrative and libidinal energies which I believe make up the stirring heart of the novel. I start

[1] Anton Shammas, *Arabesques* (trans. Vivian Eden. New York, New York Review of Books Classics), 2023.
[2] Anton Shammas, "On Exile and Literature", *Igra 2* (1985/6), 86 [in Hebrew].
[3] See *Arabesques,* 37, 43, and 263; from here on all references to the novel will be in the body of the text.

by my own warning to the effect that staking out *Arabesques* only in terms of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict is insufficient to capture its explosiveness, the wealth the novel holds. At the same time, every word in it seems to contain the sense of catastrophe, the Nakba, the Palestinians' defeat in 1948, and the despair of the Palestinian refugees whose home was destroyed.

Now in the context of the Kyoto meeting dedicated to gardens and orchards, I discover that the explosion warning which time and again makes my heart quake when reading the novel, always comes together with the inebriating scent of the local wild flowers and the dripping juices of local fruits, announcing an eruption of the senses – like the intoxicating fragrance of yellow calicotome that envelops the narrator and Surayyah Sa'id (as we will soon see) in their passionate love making, or like the carnal lust the boys witness when they peek through the cracks in the watchman's shack and echo "Wardah! Wardah!" as the watchman's wife climaxes (p. 43), and the air, soon after, fills with the sweet smells of figs, getting charred on the open fire, *areesheh.* This is how in the novel's language fabric the pleasures of the palate weave together with the lust of the body:

> From the lips of the figs comes the sound of the fire sizzling. The fig seeds dripping sweetness and ripeness on the broiling slate make almost the same sound of the suction of flesh upon flesh in the watchman's shack (*Arabesques,* p. 44).

Anton Shammas published *Arabesques* in 1986, ensnaring us in its arabesque meanderings as he packed his bags and left us, together with the land that had turned against him. But rather than moving a mere hundred meters eastwards, as his friend the Israeli writer A.B. Yehoshua counseled him, where a Palestinian state would emerge any day soon,[4] Shammas boarded a plane to the U.S., and settled down in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he took on a university position teaching comparative literature. He did not return to Israel/Palestine, leaving behind a jumble of scents mixed in with the shuddering sounds of explosions, flurries of dust everywhere – a synesthesia of sounds, smells, flavors and dust trilling in the mouth – an incomparably concrete synesthesia which at the very same time keeps disappearing into the void.

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[4] Anton Shammas, "The Babushka's Guilt", *Politika*, 5/6, February/March (1986), 44–45. [in Hebrew]

I've been corresponding with Shammas for a long time. It is a correspondence that started off with a letter of recommendation he wrote in support of a candidate's promotion during my time as head of department. As we exchange letters, I feel this is the time for me to finally read *Arabesques*. In the course of reading, I share my thoughts with Shammas, and he responds, adding his own. I write to him that the novel is written like "lace, undoing itself" – as in Mallarmé's famous "dentelle s'abolit".[5] I write to him that *Arabesques* holds out a hypnotic visual syntax which, while its assembled details and subtleties contrive to make up an entire, present world: the life of one village, Fassuta, and of one family, the Shammas family – also, at the same time, offers us a miraculous syntax that seems to make itself vanish, just like Mallarmé's self-unraveling lace. It is a syntax that, wishful and simultaneously unsure, like the tentative, subjunctive mode, undoes itself. The novel is a monument to a vanished reality which only the arabesque syntax succeeds to lay hold of, briefly, before its foretold collapse.

I write to Shammas that "in its relation between truth and fiction, as well as syntactically, *Arabesques* reminds me of Kafka's 'The Wish to be Red Indian', who also employs the subjunctive to pose a vivid, throbbing reality which at the same time undoes itself":

> If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's neck and head would be already gone.[6]

Quoting from Kafka, I wonder in parenthesis: "(Is there a wish like that in *My Antonia*?)" – Shammas has an enduring interest in Willa Cather's novel. He replies:

> I really love that wonderful fable, which I actually read in English in Iowa for the first time. And now that you conjure up the horse - Meni Salama's cover illustration [of the Hebrew *Arabesques*] seems to take it along galloping to the bitter end, and beyond […] And by the

[5] Stephane Mallarmé, *Vers et Prose* (Paris: Perrin, 1893), 46-47.
[6] Franz Kafka, "The Wish to Be a Red Indian," *The Complete Stories* (trans. Willa and Edwin Muir; edited by Nahum N. Glazer, Schocken Books, 1971), 421.

> way, there isn't a hint of Indians in *My Antonia*. They were simply non-existent in her repressing consciousness. There are no Palestinians in the world just like there are no Indians in the world because the horse, belonging to both [Palestinians and Native Americans], came to an end, forever, there will be no making good for them, neither now nor in other times. (Shammas, letter)

Anton Shammas, as you can see, responds generously to my Kafkaesque wish and to the syntax of the vanishing horse – he even doubles down on that syntax by reminding me of the illustration of the vanishing horse on the book cover. In our correspondence, Shammas goes on using the image of the self-undoing lace as he inserts more threads into the work of interpretation while pulling out others.

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The exchange between Shammas and me comes to a halt, somehow, during the Covid period. Then, during this past academic year, I am reading *Arabesques* with an MA class, and I am astonished to find Shammas's lace-work is actually hewn in stone!

> All these thoughts rise to the surface of my mind on the outskirts of the village of Beitin, near the military checkpoint, to the accompaniment of the stonecutters' saws and the beat of the masons' mallets. They swathe the scene in a mysterious veil of primal rhythm as they rise from either side of the road, pitching a canopy of sorts over its length, and the line of cars creeping toward the checkpoint goes under the canopy and blends into the pacing of the sentries and the rhythm dictated by the blows of the stonemason' mallet (*Arabesques*, pp. 36-37).

I am thrilled to find that the fabric, here, is lace made of stone. The original Hebrew uses *kila shekufa* – a transparent veil, literally – which does not come through in the English translation. How did I manage not to notice this before, I ask myself, sorry that my correspondence with Shammas was interrupted. Then, that same week, Shammas writes to me, out of the blue. Excitedly I write: "This is not just a piece of transparent fabric but a 'transparent veil hewn out of stone'." And I add: "What's so powerful about the writing in *Arabesques* is that it renders the concreteness

and hardness of stone as well as, miraculously, maintaining the translucency of a veil." Enthusiastically, Shammas welcomes this "discovery" and goes off to check in the book "whether this passage has a sufficiently concrete presence […] in the scene of Fassuta's surrender in 1948": All those present at the ceremony were covered with a thin white layer of dust, and as is the way of all dust, it did not distinguish between the conquering soldier and the conquered villager" (*Arabesques,* p. 122).

"No," he concludes, "it could have been a little more concrete."

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Now that my thought is more focused on the fragrance of wild flowers, I notice that the fabric, which looks like a transparent veil hewn out of stone, and which weaves together the sounds of the quarry, the footsteps of soldiers, and dust, is no less composed of scents! I realize that Shammas' grand project in *Arabesques* **is to make us smell the veil's transparent fabric.**

The most pungent smell in the novel is that of calicotome – *kida se'ira* in Hebrew – a yellow Galilean shrub, hairy and blazing – which like a jumble of colors and scents, **captures the novel's sensual connection between the narrative of political defeat and the erotic passion** – the latter of which occurs towards the novel's end – whether for real or fantastically – between Anton Shammas, the narrator (or maybe the Anton Shammas, his namesake, who was born in Beirut) and Surayyah Sa'id (or Layla Khoury) – biographies and doppelgangers who alternate and cross over dizzyingly throughout the novel and here are expressed by way of an aromatic entanglement:

> This is the body that should have visited the dreams of the other Anton in Beirut this is the body that should have covered him with its virginity. I go down on my knees and cup my hands around the two white buttocks, I bury my face in her triangle and breathe in the chill of the mildew, the ancient odor of the stones and the dark scent of the silt rising from the bottom of the cistern […]. I breathe in the narcissus and the cyclamen and the yellow calycanthus flowers and slowly the scraping sound ebbs away and I seem to be closer to its echo that rises from beneath me and wraps me in dim solace. Suddenly a cry is heard, and the cry shatters into a myriad of fragments, and the body of Layla Khoury, the body of

> a woman who is not yet twenty years old, is cast over me, and my body is caught on the hook of the amulet, with great reconciliation and with infinite compassion that tell me the triangle of the black amulet will remain between her breasts forever" (*Arabesques*, p. 248).

This passage, much like the rest of *Arabesques*, is extremely sensual and seems to come undone of its own accord. It contrives to do this by weaving into one event, 50 year old Surayyah, who appears as though she were 20 years old, under her former name, Layla Khoury – about whom Michel Abyad – who is a double of Anton Shammas – is passionate; at the same time the sexual encounter with Layla is also a reconstruction of Anton's (the narrator) childhood experience of being lowered into a water cistern in order to clean it, when Nawal, the neighbors' daughter is sent down after him in order to help, leading to his first experience of sexual arousal. In both cases, a black mirror cracking into pieces features – once at the bottom of the cistern, and again, later in life as Layla Khoury moaning in ecstasy casts her body over his "with great reconciliation and with infinite compassion" (*Arabesques*, p. 248).

Meanwhile, the entire scene is suffused by the smell of wild flowers, the narcissus and the cyclamen, and the overwhelmingly erotic color, smell, and hairy surface of the Galilean *kida se'ira* (as the Hebrew original has it).[7]

Yellow calicotome flowers – the Galilean *kida se'ira* – are part of my childhood's scenery in Amirim village in the Galilee. It's a thorny bush which comes out in blazing yellow blooms. How did their scent somehow escape me until now! My father, who taught me how to identify the flowers of the Galilee, said he had no sense of smell. Maybe that is why he did not reveal the secret of their scent. Maybe the intoxicating, sensual, sexual quality of that scent made him feel uneasy. It was only after I read about the smell of hairy calicotome in Shammas, that its smell struck me on a recent hike in the Galilee.

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Following my invitation to Kyoto, I write to Shammas that I will be writing about the scent of oranges and yellow *kida se'ira* in his work. But when I have to translate the title of my lecture into English, I see that the Hebrew original, *kida se'ira*, is a bit of a problem.

[7] Anton Shammas, *Arabesques* (Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1986), 222. [in Hebrew].

Ada and Doron, who organized the conference, are urging me to send them the English title. I check again how *kida se'ira* appears in the English translation of *Arabesques*. It's "yellow calycanthus flowers" (248). But when I google that name, I see a red flower! And cultivated, not wild! And American! Nothing like the thorny, bushy plant with its splendidly blazing yellow flowers which is indigenous to the Mediterranean and which should be translated with "calicotome". So I write in surprise to Shammas about how the yellow spiky calicotome seems to have been "baptized" into this cultivated red American flower, and Shammas responds defensively:

> You're definitely right about the awkward translation. But you should remember that back in the 1980s, when Vivian Eden [his English translator] and I were working on the text in Iowa City, there was no Google, and we did not have a dictionary of plants to work with. And if I'm not wrong, it was the editor, Ted Solotaroff, who was in favor of making the English text accessible, for domestic use.

I quickly reassure him. "But when I wrote about the translation of *kida se'ira* I didn't mean to comment about something like awkward translation. It was more like celebrating what Benjamin called 'the translator's task'[8] and to recognize the riches which the 'failure' of the 'awkward translation' may generate". The blazing yellow bloom from the Galilee which turned into a red American flower testifies to the failure anyone who tries to translate their experience is bound to encounter. "I actually felt happy to realize," I add, "that the scent of *kida se'ira* could not be conveyed in English, not even its color!" And Shammas is quick to be reconciled: "I really liked your explanation about the work of the translator and his failure vis a vis the flower's prickly fragrance, on the bumpy road from one tongue to another."

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In another text, "Autocartography – The Case of Palestine, Michigan"[9] – already written in the United States, Shammas unfolds a story at once brilliant, serious and impossible. It is about A., a

[8] See, Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", in *Selected Writings* (edited by, Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings [trans. unmentioned], Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1996), 253–63.
[9] Anton Shammas, "Autocartography: The Case of Palestine, Michigan", in *The Geography of Identity* (edited by Patricia Yaeger, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996), 466–475.

young American woman, daughter of Palestinian immigrants, who lives in Michigan and wants to return "home" to Palestine even though she never lived there. She carries the feeling of "home" through the lemon tree which grew in her grandmother's house in Jaffa, which the latter passed on to her granddaughter as the smell of "home". And yet, in spite of this concrete smell of "home", the narrator announces, there is no way back to Palestine: "*rahat falestin*" – Palestine is gone. Her hopes dashed, the protagonist, in a random internet search, comes across no less than fifteen Palestinians, all in the USA. Now she considers the practical solution of moving to Palestine, Michigan. Next, in a final twist, the narrator discovers to his dismay that Palestine, Michigan was founded in the late 19th century by a group of Jewish utopians, East European immigrants to the United States: they called their project "Palestine".

"I was struck dumb", writes Shammas. "[…] Could it be that Palestine […] is forever bound to be in a bitter, bloody dispute between […] generations of Jews and Palestinians, no matter where they go? Could it be that I have […], trapped my A. within a Borgesian self-referential loop?" (Autocartograhy, p. 474).

At this point I realize that all of Shammas' work may be read as shifting back and forth between two poetic solutions: on the one hand it tries to capture the evanescent, **authentic fragrance of Palestinian life**, the scent of oranges, the intoxicating-erotic smell of spiky calicotome, of the lemon tree, *lamoon* as A. pronounces it – an effort to capture the unique aura of something that no longer exists. On the other hand, however, it reflects a sense of being stuck in a **Borgesian loop** in which language has lost its power of reference to an infinity of arabesque doubles, reproductions and interlacings. The result is a texture that staples an authentic silk thread taken from a Palestinian fabric – like the fabric of a pre-modern narrative – into a postmodern, virtual, Borgesian knot, which can refer to itself alone, with all the serious implications this entails, politically and literarily.

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Shammas wonders whether language can communicate the scent the fleeing refugee still carries with him, but the question, it seems to me, is even more complicated: Can his offspring, and the offspring of this offspring hold the scent of the *lamoon* and the wild flowers which they never got to smell, but which circulates as the essence of a memory of remembered fragrance passed on through the generations?

Let me conclude with another version of the same remainder of a remainder of scent, a chain of correspondences, which appears in the major Lebanese-Palestinian writer Elias Khoury's afterword to the recent English re-publication, as a New York Review of Books Classic, of *Arabesques*.[10]

Khoury opens with an attempt to trace the presence of the Arabic language in Shammas' Hebrew (through the English translation). He likens this presence to a tattoo engraved on a hand, indelible, even if we want to, language underneath language, engraved in the skin, a presence enfolded in the body.

Such pains afflicted Khoury on reading about Almaza's deep grief, as she wails out in her sorrow and despair, clasping the pillow of her infant, Anton, who perhaps died or might have been kidnapped – such pains afflicted Khoury that he could not resist borrowing the pillow from Shammas and pass it onto the narrator's grandmother in his own novel *Gate of the Sun (Bab el Shams*, 2000). The grandmother stuffs the pillow with weeds and flowers she picks in the alleys of the Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon so that she may breathe in "the smell of Palestine" when she goes to sleep. Even though the weeds and flowers were picked in the camp in Beirut, "the scents of Palestine were stronger than the scents of the refugee camp, because they inhabited the Palestinians, bodies, memories, and all".[11]

Khoury concludes his essay by tying the way in which the wild flowers take over the pillow to the manner in which Shammas' Palestinian diction takes over the Hebrew language, in a move that constitutes the *fitnah* of his novel: *fitnah*, Khoury explains, is an Arabic word, referring to temptation and allure, as well as, sedition, discord and strife:

> The Fitnah of that pillow was my way of telling my friend Anton Shammas that literature is born out of literature; that the flowers of Palestine took over the pillow, the way his Palestinian language took over Hebrew; that, unfortunately, we are still at the beginning of the story created by the horror of the Nakbah, which has been going on for more than seventy years.[12]

[10] Elias Khoury, "Afterword: Arabesques: The Novel of Enchantment and Intrigue"', afterword in *Arabesques* (trans. Vivian Eden. New York, New York Review of Books Classic, 2023), 265–269.
[11] Ibid, 269
[12] Ibid.

Only now I understand how crucial the scent of wild flowers is in *Arabesques*. The presence of the Arabic language in the novel spreads like their fragrance and is carried in the air: through its original Hebrew, this can be smelled!