

Khalil Hawi (1919 – 1982)

A trip of depression and suicide

Hawi was born and reared in a rural town known for its distinctive natural beauty and its importance as a center of education and economy to the surroundings. This environment influenced his sensibility to beauty and creativity and broadened his mind by allowing him the opportunity to contact different cultures, since the town hosted different missionary institutions (Protestants, Catholics...) that offered education to all interested scholars in the nearby villages and towns. Hawi first contact with public life was through the “National and Social Syrian Party”¹. A party that was the first to cultivate the poet and open his heart and mind to political, cultural and social issues. In time Hawi sensed that the political vision of this party doesn't suit this region of the world. He viewed that Arabic Nationalism² is more suitable. He found in its values and decrees the ideal to unite all Arabs, from the Gulf to the Ocean. Hawi dedicated most of his literature to the evolution and promotion of these values and also to express his beliefs in the possibility of the resurrection of an Arabic democratic unity³

On a personal level, Hawi was urged to face the difficulties of life at an early age. At twelve, his father fell sick incapable of supporting the family, Hawi left school to work in the building industry filling the gap left by the sickness of the father. When the economical situation of the family was restored he returned to school, summed his high school education in one condensed year and continued his academic education at the American University of Beirut, received his BA in 1951 and his Masters in 1955. He was granted a scholarship to Cambridge University and got his Ph.D. in 1959. Since that date, Hawi worked as a professor in the same university, lecturing and researching in literary criticism, until his suicide in June 1982, which was a reaction to the Israeli invasion of The Lebanon “⁴”

Hawi had introduced to the Arabic library many volumes of poetry:
The River of Ashes, 1957

¹ A political party sees in natural Syria (Lebanon, Syria, Jordon, Palestine, Iraq and Cyprus) a unity tied in land and history and common interests,

² Arabic nationalism is a movement more than a party, it sees in all Arab countries as a unity, if united will be an effective powerful force playing a great roll in the world. Of its beliefs merged many political parties such as Al Ba'Th, Arab national party, An Nasserieen. Jamal Abed En Nasser was the most prominent figure of this movement, and his dream in a great Arabic nation is still alive in the hearts of many Arabs from the ocean to the Gulf

³ Ritta Awad, “Khalil Hawi”, The Arab institution for Researches and Studies, 1983, Beirut, Lebanon, PP: 19 – 23

⁴ Khalil Hawi selections from his verse and prose, Illya Hawi, The Arabic Institution for publishing and distributing, Beirut-Lebanon, 1983, diff. PP,

The Flute and the Wind, 1961
The Fields of Hunger, 1965
The Injured Thunder, 1979
The Comedy of Hell, 1979

In prose Hawi wrote some books in literary criticism and philosophy. “Mind and Faith in between Alghazaly and Ibn Rushd”, Gebran Khalil Gebran: his influence and his works” was first in English, then translated to Arabic in 1962. Besides he contributed literary and critical essays to different literary magazine especially Al-Adaab. He had monitored and supervised the foundation of the encyclopedia of Arabic poetry, which published the forth of its parts in 1974.

A journey of despair

Hawi’s suicide created a controversy among intellectuals in the Arab world. What kind of disappointment had he suffered to lead him to a decision not familiar in that culture? ...Following his poetic impulse might give us an answer to that question.

Searching Hawi’s poetical journey one can finds that he stopped writing after his poem “Lazarus” which was a reflection of the state of depression and disappointment that overcame the Arab world after the fall of the Arab union in 1961⁵. The poet broke his silence after the 1967 Arab Israeli war and the bitter defeat he sensed pushed him to write “The Mourning Mother”, which was a depiction of the impotence and nothingness where the face of the creator turned to a deadly desert, the whole world had died by the death of its creator. The poem does not see, in the June defeat, a mere martial or political or cultural downfall, but a complete death and an end of life. He compared the mourning of Virgin Mary to the Arab situation and declared that the Arabic State is worse. The Virgin had sent one, and only one son to the grave while the Arab nation sent thousands and thousands of Messiah...darkness, despair, depression, smears the poem from the very beginning to the last word: “ *nothing in the horizon, but a coal soot/ from ocean to gulf*”

After this sardonic poem, Hawi submerged again in silence. In 1971 he broke his silence and wrote “Lighting and Fogs”. The deep sadness that characterized his previous works had been replaced by sarcasm towards him self and the surroundings. He also predicted that a new enlightenment is about to shine from within the deep heart of darkness and fog, but due to consecutive disappointments he had experienced before, he was cautious not to attain high expectations.

Time after time I closed my eyes
Denying these lightning, dropping all curtains
Leaving night falls over the remains of a dying lantern
Coated in silence

⁵ Syria and Egypt were united as one Arab country in 1958. It was the pride and the hope of many in the Arab world. The separation movement that occurred in 1961 caused disappointment and bitterness to them. Hawi was one of them

The frustrations he had suffered in the past stood as nightmares between him and his vision of that strong vital cavalier, but that cavalier impresses himself brightly shining from the deep heart of darkness and ruin and blackness

In mountains of nightmare of detachment and agitation
Where a mute owl
Is masticating blackness
Strolls a bright youthful cavalier
A cavalier wiping the tears of the hungry and the sad
Stripping the “verb”
Of the “noun”, the “adverb” and the “veil”

The hesitant optimism that enlightened this poem, developed to become more confident in a poem called “A Letter from Saleh to Thamoud”⁶. Through it, the poet had viewed the resurrection of the Arabic civilization reborn on the hands of a new hero, a hero coming to salvage the nation from its misery, to fix with strikes of his strong hammer new legislation and new rules and to change the caves of darkness to rooms of bright mirrors. He is the promise that the earth is waiting to resurrect her from its death. He is the God who blesses the “*mercy death*” and “*grants the two celestials*” (the sun and the moon), He carries the idiosyncrasy of the Messiah that lightens in his eyes tears of love and anger (A sign to Jesus revolt in the temple). Hawi cognates his Hero with the Arabic prophet Muhammad who conquered his enemies in their own fortified shelter the desert. In this poem Hawi raised a similarity between the migration of the Arabic Profit from Mecca to Al-Madina and the exodus of the Palestinians off their homeland in 1948. A comparison predicts the inevitable Palestinian return to their homeland.

And tomorrow the green paradise will flourish
In a sun shining over the edge of the sword
Didn't shine once over Poets
In their daydreams
The only thing to be born
Only brass and the desert brownies
In a migrant hero
Only the assured springs bright for the migrant
Spreads in the exile a shadow of a cloud
Oil and a lantern
A guide for the returnees

In the middle of this promising faith, the unexpected had happened. The Israeli invasion to Lebanon, disaster had struck to devastate the poet and all his promising dreams. Amidst fatal despair and disappointment, Hawi decided to put an end to his life. While his response to the defeat of June 1967 was a sardonic poem “The Mourning Virgin”, the unbearable harsh situation of June 1982 led him to a bullet to the head in order to relief the heart of all its sufferings and disappointments.

⁶ Saleh : An Arabic prophet had sent by God to his people Thamoud to guide them to God ,but they denied his message, and because of their arrogance they were swallowed by an earthquake

The Missionary Poet

Hawi was one of few poets who adventured a new Arabic poetic scene, a scene that started with As- Sayab in Iraq, Appollo group in Egypt and Shi'r magazine in Lebanon and flourished and introduced a new modernized image at the hands of poets like Saleh Abd-Essabour, Adonis, Mahmmoud Darwish and others. This new Adventure aimed at the unfamiliar in the poetic image, which shock traditional values and conventions, thus paving the way to a new modern outlook in poetry. Poets became more interested in exploring language and its capacities; the image became an aim by itself. A new era began to dawn in Arabic poetry. This modern revolution was threatened by the dramatic political and social changes that were invading the Arabic world, a fear that political values would overcome aesthetic values, a condition that might lead the poets to fall into repetitive uses of symbols and meanings such as resistance, self sacrifice, heroism and so on, but the talented poets resisted this seduction instinctively and instead of drowning on what was feared, they endeavored to create rich metaphors where the nature in all its landscape and the history in all its treasures and figures, and the human feeling by all its contrariety, worked together to give the poetic image its genuinity and its originality. Hawi was among those talented ones. Since the very beginnings of his poetic journey, Hawi revolted against the traditional rhyme and employed the single meter in his measures. His poetic expressions and images were original and creative far from the traditional and thus exhausted ones. A new notion for the role of the poet is shown in his verses. This doesn't mean that Hawi turned his back on the issues of his generation. On the contrary, a poem, to Hawi, was not a place to sing personal emotions or express day to day needs, it was, an interaction between the poet and his surroundings, an expression of all human concerns: anxiety, existence, worthwhileness, wisdom beyond birth and death.... The mission of a profit reads to the present and predicts the future. Hawi called for the toppling of all old values and bringing back to the earth its very early chastity in order to build a vital evolved world. Hawi did not stop at the brink of toppling, he believed that a poet who launched rejection and stopped there would end in impotence and futility. The poet should be able to create new values ⁷. To reveal these values that Hawi devoted his creativity to, I will discuss three different pieces from three different stages of his life

In his first collection "The River of Ashes" 1957, Hawi raised the issue of existence, the puzzlement of the human being and his/her confusion toward civilization and primitivism, the intellectual and the intuitive. Some studies saw in his poem "The Sailor and the Darwish"(The first and the longest in the collection), a comparison between materialistic western civilization and the eastern spiritual one; others saw in it an existentialist dilemma; possibly, it is a reflection of the poet's perplexity after his contact

⁷ - Commitment in Arabic poetry, Ahmad Abu Hakah, Dar al ilm llmalayen , Beirut, Lebanon, 1979, p. 563 taken from a broadcast interview with the poet and mentioned in: "Books and Authors", by Adib Elian and William Elkhazen, The Modern Publishement, Sayda Lebanon,1970, p. 67

with the modern western civilization, intellectually through his academic life, then physically when he went to Cambridge to fulfil his education

“The Sailor” in the poem is a bewildered man who sails after knowledge, tolerates the difficulties of tramping and seasickness and alienation to discover and investigate, hoping to find a solution to his tormented soul. It’s the ultimate human soul facing the quest of existence and the search for happiness. Ad-darwish is the other face of this soul who prefers slackness and reliance on the supernatural in solving problems. The sailor in his travels ends to the land of Ad-darwish, hoping to find an answer to his puzzlement.

After suffering seasickness
And facing the unknown and the darkness of the road
After seeing waves spread their blue shroud over him
After exposing to real death
After stricken by wild wind
The wind threw him to the old east

Reaching his destination did not mean reaching his peace of mind. This imaginary land where Ad-darwish lives is a land of stagnation and nothingness. His being is limited in prayers and praising God, as if he is there for thousands of years, as if no other life or concerns exist outside his door

When meeting with Ad-darwish the sailor discovers that there is no relieving answer to his quest. Ad-darwish from his side is convinced that this materialistic civilization is nothing but illusion and confusion to the harmony of live. He figures that the peak of the human civilization (the Greek and the Roman) is nothing but a mere outburst of mud, carrying in its birth its own death, “A child born for few moments”, because its concerns are only materialistic, while the Eastern civilization is eternal because it is related to the unknown and the supernatural. The sailor though agreeing with the idea that the Western civilization is nothing but “a heated mud” refuses the eastern one for its deep reliance on the supernatural and its complete surrender to the wills of the unknown, neglecting human urge to seek knowledge and investigate reality, so he ended up saying:

Leave me alone! All lanterns died in my eyes
Let me go to where I don’t know
I will not be seduced by the far harbors
Most of them are but heated mud
Oh! How many times I was burnt in the heated mud
I will not be seduced by the far harbors
Leave me for the sea, for the wind, for death
Spreading blue shrouds over the drowned
Sailing, died in his eye, lantern of the road
Died that light in his eyes, died
Neither heroism saves him, nor the humble prayers

“Lazarus” is another long poem that could be set as an example of Hawi’s creativity and his ability to express his vision in an innovative and perceptive style⁸. Some studies see in

⁸ Of his collection “Threshing floor of Thunder” 1965

this poem a masterpiece that reaches the top of creativity, not on the Arabic level only, but universally. As mentioned before, this poem was a reflection of the failure of the Arabic unity between Egypt and Syria in 1961. In this poem Hawi announced the death of his prophecy and his bright vision towards the future, he was devastated and saw in himself a fake profit with a fake vision.

Hawi introduced his poem by an introduction explaining the circumstances and the feelings that led to the creation of the poem. The following is a loose translation of this introduction:

You were the echo of Falling at the beginning of the strife, and then you became the rattle of many falls stretched in many stages... Your features started to buildup themselves in me and squeezing out of every striver, who falls, his best and most popular characteristics. Then the noises started to settle on an image clearly rhythmmed, revealing its innermost turbidity (muddiness)... When I finished creating you, when you raised up from the steam of womb and the soot of the smelter, you were a pain and a fear to my eyes. I had tried to demolish and reconstruct you; I suffered plenty of bitterness before I decided not to shape you in a better feature and a stronger faith and for a greater destiny. You are the character of this generation and the many generations where goodness and generosity are stricken by the impossible and transformed to their contrasts. In it the "Alkhoder"⁹ transmigrate to the nature of the "Dragon" who kills and dissipates, where humiliation is the source of its growth:

"A giant I have seen, raising of the pocket of an intercessor"

And then, within something like intuition, the present united with all times, and the real with the legend and you gained a name and the name was the essence of your being. Lazarus, the life and the death in life. The values die within the striver and the vitality immerses, and then the tyrant will be.

What does it mean to me if the caring Nazarene denies your death since you are the tragic hero who glows in a splendid sacrifice and its rapt wounds?

"Sailing, exuberant, wrapped in glory of purple"

Why be resurrected, when you are "dead, fossilized by the lust of death"? While the resurrection is a spring from within the inner soul

Here is your wife meets you returning from the hole, gets frightened

"Why did he come from his hole bleak dead
Nothing but a stem bleeds sulfuric black blaze?"

⁹ - Alkhoder is the hero of a popular biblical tale that tells the story of a city was threatened by the dragon, and Alkhoder was the hero who killed the dragon and saved the city of its fatal destiny

She is a symbol of life, are you coming to avenge her for the lost good past, and to make her like yourself, and to draw her to the same destiny you had? She kept falling till she reached your deep hell and hole. You pumped the sulfur in her blood, and she, in return, turned to you biting and scratching...She was aiming towards perfection that fulfils her body and soul, you disappointed her, you, her dead malignant husband. You were helped by the Nazarene, who by his heavenly perfection is leveled over the materialistic experience. She refused to pray to a God who knows no hunger and didn't suffer the poison left by the snakes of urging congested lust.

What is the benefit of praying?
To a heavenly God and a heavenly ghost
Hides in the blue clouds, in the smooth light
Where there is no thundering hunger roars in pain

It is obvious that the evolution of life will be stopped when it is merely spiritual, idealistic, divine or low materialistic, when the vitality disappears and the illusion spreads its anaesthetic shadow over the real existence.

After all, you aren't related to any group or another
I was witnessing and I have seen you in all their groups¹⁰

Different analysis and explanations were given to this poem. Some said it is an expression of bitterness and depression after the fall of Arab unity in 1961, others said, it's a rejection of the idea of resurrection, and some saw in it a prediction of the Arab defeat in June 1967. Perhaps, Lazarus is a message to Arab generations that are simulating the old glorious days of The Arabic Empire. Possibly it implies a revolt over the mainstreamed notion of Arab Unity, that meant to say there will be no real successful unity if you want it a mere resurrection of what was known in the past, you should create a new unity that has new measures and new perception and a new criteria, not a copy of the past.

"Sindbad in his Eighth Journey" is the last poem in the poet collection "The Flute and the Wind" 1961. About his intentions in this poem Hawi says: I tried to reach the deep roots of our complicated problems that make our destiny: politically, economically and culturally. My aim was to strip the inner national soul and burst the rich vital potential in it. To do that I started at the beginning of my experience by objecting and revolting against all elements of degradation in our life, then I realized that the best way to evolve is to have every individual goes back to his/her inner self, discover it, judge it, and condemn it strictly, then deconstruct it and rebuild it with vital values. It's within my beliefs that the inner self of an individual carries the seeds of his/her nation. So he/she potentially carries the characteristics of a whole civilization and a complete generation. In doing so there will be an interaction between the inside and the outside.¹¹

¹⁰ - Khalil Hawi selections from his verse and prose, PP: 80 - 82

¹¹ - *ibid.*, Commitment in Arabic poetry, p. 562

Hawi in his revolt does not meet half way nor does he come around, he sees that corruption is striking deeply in his people's life, and it is of the kind that could not be mended by normal pain killers, imputation is the ideal solution. Hawi in his revolt doesn't exempt any axiom whether it is religious, social or political. He denies the concept of obedience and submission found in the religious speech, and sees in its rituals an assassination of the purity in the virgin intuition.

And Moses sees,
A hammer of blazing fire
Digs in rocks
The Ten Commandments of his God
The Tar, the Sulfur, the salt over Sodom

Hawi refuses the fake relations among people that defect the purity of the woman and enlarge the temperament of the blind tiger within the male, which lead the woman to adopt the nature of the snake (hypocrisy, deception and artifice) and the man to nourish his selfishness and irrational jealousy. Hawi sees that who has given the authority to forbid and allow woman-man relationships a bastard implant poison and distortion among human relationships.

And a priest in the temple of God
Rears a dissipated python and an owl
Rapes the secret of fertility within the virgins
The Drunkards hail
The wombs and the vineyards fruitile

Socially Hawi revolts against the connotations that consider the woman inferior to man being and a source of evil. He opposes the duality we have in every day life, especially our perception about sexual relationships where people exercise secret relationships and pretend that they despise and deny it in public. He used a very effective metaphor from Arabic literature, a great poet who is known through over generations for his animosity towards woman, "Abu Al ala' Alma'ari"¹² who sees in her a sinful deceitful trivial human being, while in his dreams he craves her fruits

Here is "Alma'ari"
In his deep blindness
All his life is but, a woman's deceit
Not bathed of her blood
Smells her thighs, couldn't bear
The two edges of the sin river, painted with perfume
The rounded breasts
The brightened face
The old criminal
The bitter fruits he craved for

¹² - A great poet of the Al Abbassy period, (973 – 1057) tends toward nihilism in his literature. Lived his life isolated disgusting people and company. The most important of his work is "The letter of Forgiveness" which is an advanced work in idea and perception to Dante's ' The Divine Comedy

These are some of the diseases that Hawi was seriously concerned about, Why? Because out of them fumes a vapor full of poison that increases the fever of hypocrisy in the female and the fierceness of the tiger and Deek el Jin¹³ blindness within the male.

In spite of all these dark images that depress the poet, he still keeping faith in his nation hoping its collective soul would raise out of its stumble and flourishes with flowers and fruits. This sunrise will not be due to outside circumstances but due to the potentials that she carries in within

I don't allege that a God's angel
Poured virgin wine and green ember
Within my body filled with ice

.....

It could be the wounds
It could be the sea, the scratches of waves and winds
Or the white coma and the frostbite
Drew my veins to the earth veins
The white shroud was a shield
Under it, fermented the spring

At the end, after this long exhausted journey the poet reaches the truth. After purifying himself of all false values, he returns to mere purity, the instinct that is similar to the bird's instinct that knows what is in the womb of nature before the season's birth. He had seen his people bathing and clearing of all false values and scars of sin, in The Nile and The Jordan and Euphrates.

To conclude, we might say: Hawi was a poet of independence in self and soul, a poet of modern enlightenment and originality, a poet with a mission delivered in creativity and dignity far away from directness and repetition

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¹³- Deek El Jin is a poet from the Alabbassy period (777 – 849) , loved a maiden and enchanted by her till his blind jealousy led him to kill her then spent all his life mourning her