

12

IMPOSSIBLES

Stories by rebellious Arabic writers

Selected and translated from Arabic to Serbian by Srpko Leštarić

Translated from Serbian to English by Edward Alexander

Abdulah Hakam

Appendix to the Report on the Individual who Goes by the Name of Ali ibn Alwan

At exactly seven o'clock in the evening, the individual in question, going by the name of Ali ibn Alwan, entered the coffee-house with a newspaper under his arm and, as usual, headed over to the dark corner where he would sit every time. The other one was already there waiting for him, baby-faced and with some sort of a smile in his eyes. He took off his rain coat and sat down. He stared into the face of the other one and mumbled a few words which we could not discern. However, by lip reading, we came to the conclusion that he had repeated his habitual sentence:

“So... what's up?... Surely there's nothing new!?”

When the lad who works in the coffee-house came over to them he ordered a tea while at the same time chivying him along with a wave of his hand. Herein, when the tea arrived, he said something else to the lad. His lips stretched out into a sweet smile. He delved his hand into his pocket, pulled out some money and gave it to the lad. When we enquired about this later to find out what he had said to him, he admitted that Ibn Alwan had reminded him about something which had happened on one of the previous days, when he had forgotten to pay his bill.

Of course, this explanation should not prevent us from emphasising that Ibn Alwan very often establishes close relationships with common workers and allows them to sit and talk with him. Concerned that such relations could develop further, we drew to the attention of the coffee-house's owner that without fail he should change his staff from time to time, something which he wholeheartedly accepted without the slightest pressure or insistence on our part.

At five minutes past seven, Ibn Alwan again smiled, but prior to this moved his slippers, and in doing so gave a sign to the other one. We must note here that until this moment we had not known, despite all of the possibilities which you placed at our disposal, that this other person (Who sticks to Ibn Alwan more than his own name) was also called Ali ibn Alwan. We looked over our records and searched through our files but could not find either a single photo of him or the smallest bit of information about him. This alerted us, so we assigned three experienced men to

follow him. However, in spite of this, each time he managed to evade them in thoroughly unexpected ways!

Naturally, this could not be an obstruction for us so on one occasion we brought him in for questioning. On that occasion we discovered that he cannot hear nor is he able to speak. We were forced to let him go because of this.

We are bound, nevertheless, to emphasise that this deaf-mute, who claims that he himself is called Ali ibn Alwan, is no less dangerous than the Ali ibn Alwan who you know from our earlier reports. The danger lies in the strange way in which he communicates. What we are talking about is some sort of new method, the secret of which we have yet to get to the bottom of.

We wrote to the Bureau of Citizenship about this dual collusion, seeking that they provide us with the information which they have at their disposal on both of the Alis, to which we received the following answer, filed on 15.09.1970:

For the attention of the Head of the General Investigation Department:

In response to your memo (Classified No. 242) from 23rd November 1967, with regards to the data which is available in our records on the respective parties, going by the name of Ali ibn Alwan, we wish to inform you that following a thorough investigation and detailed evaluation we have no mention of either of them in our files.

We remind you, however, that an old set of files did exist from 1947/1948 but that we previously received orders from you to destroy them due to the multitude of strictly confidential and potentially dangerous data which they contained.

We are unaware as to whether those named had dossiers in these files. Since both of the respective parties possess identification documents issued by our Bureau, according to the numbers and dates which you cite in the report, this would indicate that the aforementioned assumption is unfounded. We remain at your disposal for subsequent investigations and checks – and the keys to success are in God's hands.

Signature:

Head of the Bureau for Passports and Citizenship

At ten minutes past seven Ali ibn Alwan laughed:

“Ha! Now I know precisely everything that they're aiming for,” was what he said.

The other did not utter a single word to this. He did not even move his hands, rather he left them to lie ostensibly indifferently, in front of himself, on the table. His eyes were expressionlessly nailed to the glass wall of the coffee-house. We are not sure, however, whether or not he moved his feet under the table because the darkness in the corner where they were sat prevented us from seeing this clearly.

Ibn Alwan responded to this through a smile:

“No, no – those are just the facts! There's nothing to speculate about – there's absolutely nothing to discuss!”

The other raised his hand and scratched his head. Both of them laughed, and then this other one took out a piece of paper and a pen from his pocket and wrote something down.

We must here emphasise that it was only with this that we became aware that the pair communicate by writing. Ibn Alwan took the piece of paper, read it, then wrote something else down – the clock at this point showing that it was twenty past seven – and the other then took back the paper, read it, lit a match and burned it!

We did not manage to find out what was written on that piece of paper, although we are convinced that it is closely related to the plot which is being forged against the state, which our great allied nation's Great Agency has already warned us about.

Ibn Alwan spoke very loudly the whole time, but we know that this was just a ploy to mislead us, to deliberately usher us off in the wrong direction from that which he himself was taking – especially when it is known that we closely followed practically his every move and that every individual with whom he was in any sort of contact has ended up in prison.

Were it possible for us to follow the directions of the Great Agency, which say that the second Ibn Alwan should be arrested and that information should be extracted from him, we firmly

believe that we would succeed in thwarting all of the plans which those two individuals are cooking up.

At this point we must provide the following note: we once again interrogated the deaf-mute Ali ibn Alwan, this time by a method of writing. We wrote him several questions, to which he took a pencil and wrote down his answers. But, reading those answers, we had not succeeded in learning anything, with the exception of one single thing: the name *Ali ibn Alwan*, which he wrote *before* the question “What is your name?”. Everything else was completely illegible. Even the graphologists, who we had called to help us, confirmed that during all of their studies and many years of work they had never encountered such a style of writing: moreover, they took the stance that what he had written was not even letters, rather mere scribbles which do not carry any definite meaning.

Those answers are still in our laboratories, where they are being studied and examined. At the same time, our interest in the two Alis compelled us to call upon the help of our great allied nation's Great Agency's apparatus, and thus we received the following report:

For the attention of Head of the General Investigative Department:

In response to your memos (Classified No. 228 and No. 339) from 23rd October 1973, requesting that we offer you the information which we possess regarding the two individuals going by the name Mister Alwan, we are pleased to be able to inform you that we have found the relevant data in our files.

According to our data, a tribal chief going by this name appeared in Yemen at the time of the Abyssinian occupation.¹ More precisely, the same appeared in the town of Hajjah. Relying upon the narratives provided by those who knew him personally, legend says that the named taught the people of that land law and grammar, as well as holding sermons in the temple at the end of each evening prayers. These gatherings performed a huge role in the subsequent expulsion of the Abyssinians from Yemen. Our information furthermore reveals that the named was trapped and murdered and that the Yemenis built a mausoleum which bears his name to this very day.

Following this, he appeared again in a village in Nubia, in Egypt, where above all else he played a prominent role in those bloody events which were then raging throughout Egypt.²

¹ The middle of the 6th century. (This and all following footnotes by Srpko Leštarić – E.A.)

² This concerns events from the 19th century.

The authorities, however, did not manage to capture him. After this, news about him ceases to emerge.

Nevertheless, Mister Alwan did appear again. This was about twenty-six years ago, in Britain's capital city when one of the universities there witnessed the appearance of a rebellious young Arab whose picture resembles the photograph which you attached to your report. That young man, with a number of young Arabs and young people from the third world, carried out several illegal activities. They founded their secret society and their supporters spread throughout the countries which the Free World held under its control. The British authorities arrested both him and a number of his companions. In the report which we received, it states that Mister Alwan met his death during an attempt by British authorities to extract information from him.

We, however, have not worked on updating Mister Alwan's dossier for some time now due to the considerable changes which have occurred in many places in Third World countries, irrespective of the fact that until recently they found themselves under the control of the Free World.

This is the text of the report which we received. And, carefully observing the photograph which had been attached, we discovered that it looked just the same as both of those who we suspected. We therefore ask for your permission to carry out the arrest of both one and the other of the Alis, bearing in mind that both of them are extremely dangerous individuals.

King regards etc.

APPENDIX "A", without number:

We inform you that both individuals named Ali ibn Alwan became deceased during attempts which were made to extract information from them. The death of both one and the other occurred unexpectedly, meaning that we were unable to achieve any sort of findings.

APPENDIX "B", filed as No. 340:

With reference to our memos Confidential No. 338/73 and Confidential No. 339/73 from 22nd and 23rd October 1973, it is with the greatest regret that we must declare that the two individuals going by the name of Ali ibn Alwan have once again appeared, despite the irrefutable

fact that we were previously sure of their death.

We note that their appearance at this point in time presents exceptional danger to our plans. We expect your urgent directives.

The named individuals appeared on Sunday, 13th April 1975.

STORIES ABOUT STORIES

A note about the author, story and title

This story was published in Baghdad's eminent literary magazine *Al-Aqlam (Quills)* no. 6/1979 without even the most cursory of notes about its author. The presumption that he was so well known that it was adequate to provide the average reader with nothing more than his name and homeland has not been vindicated: nobody who I have asked – be they students of literature from various Arab countries, or journalists, or professors at Iraqi universities, nor experts on the Orient in Belgrade – had ever heard of him, let alone any of his other works. A few years ago, after an unexplained hiatus, the magazine in question again started up, but upon sending a letter to its editorship, and thereby following my one and only clue, I still have not received any answer.

Whilst awaiting an answer, I continue to make enquiries here and there by means of numerous meetings with Arabs (which the nature of my profession has kindly bestowed upon me), and it is almost as though I am not really hurrying to uncover the desired facts. The writer of this circuitous account, a Middle Eastern follower of Poe, Wells, Akutagawa and, perhaps, Borges, a fellow-traveller of Pekić or Kiš, whose heroes are brought to life without arousing even a shred of doubt in such a *possibility* (somehow, we are all perfectly aware that Ali ibn Alwan is eternal and indestructible, because all people are ibn Alwans - after all, both names, both Ali and Alyan, signify *loftiness* and thus an *affiliation to the sky*), could have had a good reason to make use of a pseudonym.

I also imagine (probably again without any basis) that he could in fact be better known in the West, going under some sort of foreign name which he has used to publish a number of works in English, French or, as you please, Eskimo language; it also came to my mind that he now lives far from his homeland (voluntarily? forcedly?) in so much as he was beset by the same misfortunate glory as other masters of the pen who share the fate of the characters which they themselves created, having dreamed up in them a vision of their own destiny. However, if this is the case, I do not know whether we are now allowed to view him as being unfortunate, for we know from his story that he would then also have to soon appear in a new place?

But, whoever the author might be, the spirit with which he created the substance of this story, the certainty with which he organised its subject matter and the impeccable language of the

original lead me to devote dozens of hours to it, in the belief that the story alone deserves publication in Serbo-Croatian even before it would be equipped with the customary accompanying material which offers precise information about its author. With this it would immediately be built into the being of our culture, leaving to time and a little additional toil (or chance), to allow it to play out its humble role in the presentation of contemporary Arabic literature through our closer familiarising with the author. Such an order to affairs would certainly be in keeping with the will of its creator.

* * *

The title of the original is *Mulhaq li-t-taqrīr al-wārid ‘an al-mad‘ūw Ali ibn Alwān*. I discounted the alternative translation of *Report Supplement* not just because *appendix* is usually an administrative word, but more so because the dative construction, as a case of ownership in Serbo-Croatian, suits me more than the genitive case; after that only (maybe entirely redundantly) a rational justification appeared: the more genuine dative-formed *Appendix to the Report* maintains the dimension of *movement-actuality* in the cyclically experienced time, while it is lost in the solidity (stasis) of the genitive.

Unfortunately, I was unable to preserve certain finesses which one could smoothly convey in an English translation of the title as *An Annex/Appendix (=mulhaq) to The Report (=li-t-taqrīr)*, using the procedure of *one-to-one correspondence*, commonly known as *literal translation*; this procedure would be justified for this title, even though it has more in common with geometry and arithmetic rather than translation which is far more related to mathematical logic, combinatorics and integral-differential calculus. Nevertheless, I do not think that we are permitted to be jealous here. Serbo-Croatian is a language which does not have articles, nor does it show a particular inclination to develop them, rather for the most part it just satisfies itself with flirting with particularisation through the words *jedan* (=one) and *neki* (=some). Moreover, personally I believe that I am a linguistic patriot even when I come to terms with the fact that the aforementioned finesses are barely discernible in our translation, keeping in mind that the bare nouns in the title do not even give a real chance to the adjectival aspect which Serbo-Croatian justifiably prides itself upon - I say so justifiably because I know that it is unaware that for a long time it has started losing them.

The registrar's term *al-mad‘ūw* (literally *he who is called, he who goes by the name of*) reveals that, under the lustre of this ancient expression standardised one and a half millennia ago, Arabic fortunately maintained its elastic use of a participle without which our language suffers greatly,

struggling with the demands of time like a sinner with his soul. I am almost resentful at the thought that the English *The One (Who is) Called* or *The One Named* (ideally it would be just *The Named*) might better suit both the Anglo-Saxon linguistic manner and the original phrase itself as well, than the similar Serbo-Croatian circumlocution of *the individual who goes by the name of* (which I chose without undue indecision) suits our linguistic sensibilities – I had to be careful not to use the word *person* given that I am sure that, considering its conceptual content, it would never find a place in a report by the secret police.

Finally, the story which is called *Appendix to the Report*, is built like a *hypertext*, in the quasi-documentary form of a report which contains within itself other reports as well, and at the end also delivers a further two attachments: attachment “A” and attachment “B”. Only the latter is important - the first being entirely predictable. Hence the use of the singular in the title. The same also applies to visible characters, the pair of ibn Alwans – and much more of them – who are all one. But this was masterfully ensured by the author himself; all that remained for the translator (the first reader of the potential Serbian *edit* of the same story) was to take it in and acknowledge it.

Belgrade, 1989.

Baghdad, Beirut - several years later

Nowadays in Serbia we know almost nothing about the development of modern prose in Saudi Arabia, although from various signs it can be presumed that free thought, which is the only means by which a story such as *The Attachment to the Report on the Individual who Goes by the Name of Ali ibn Alwan* can be created, did not find particularly convivial conditions in that country. I translated this story in the middle of the 1980s, during my stay in Baghdad which lasted several years, and this translation (accompanied by the prior note) appeared in Serbia in *Književna reč (Literary Word)*, no. 336, January 1989. Neither until then, nor for many years later, did I succeed in finding out anything about its creator.⁴¹

In the autumn of 1995, again residing for an extended period in Baghdad, I asked the Iraqi writers Abdul Sattar Nassir, Abdul Khaliq al-Rukabi and Majid al-Samarrai, then the head director of the magazine *Al-Aqlam* and a living encyclopedia on the happenings in Baghdad's cultural life over the previous three decades, that they read the mysterious story. As though in one voice they all declared that Abdullah Hakam was not a real name, rather a pseudonym behind which could only hide the Saudi Abdullah Bakhishwin. During the mid 1970s a large number of young Saudis studied at Al-Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, the oldest in the Middle East; only one of them spent his time writing - that was Bakhishwin.

Feigning naivety, I asked why this young man, surely in search of publicity, would use a fake name when publishing this story in a magazine read throughout the whole Arab world. My friends were amazed. They began to compete with each other to contrive the potential consequences which would befall that young man should it become known in his country that he has written *such* a story. Had not Abdul Rahman Munif, the receiver of a doctorate in Belgrade and an expert in Ivo Andrić, had his Saudi citizenship forever revoked, and was he not forced to emigrate precisely because he had published his famous “prison” novel *East of the Mediterranean!*? They reminded me how the magazine’s editorial board had been relieved of their positions not long after this story appeared,

⁴¹ The confusion concerning the authorship had, as it was heard later, another, "domestic" episode as well. At the meeting of *Literary Term's* editorial board for the issue's layout, having judged that there was no indication of a translated text (especially since it was an Arabic text in question which, so the presumption implies, cannot be fluently translated), and that a person going by my name and surname surely does not exist, Gojko Tešić claimed that the story was written by the hand of some local maestro (or at least a budding future star) who put it forward under an eccentric pseudonym and the mask of a translation – all in the manner of Borges in so much as there is a deceitful accompanying note to boot. All were in accord, however, that, despite everything which was as clear as day to them, the story still deserved to be published because it was a real gem of short prose which would not bring shame upon any world anthology, although the truth would surely come to light sooner or later. Vasa Pavković, who was in possession of the facts, arrived late at the meeting – but just in time to pitifully stick his neck out giving a true testimony on the whole affair. Thus, to the general disappointment, the magic vanished before it had even begun.

deemed as being politically unsuitable, and Samarraï remembered how her author moved to Lebanon somewhat abruptly, under rather unclear circumstances.

Abdullah Bakhishwin, they told me, was born in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in either 1950 or 1951. He firstly studied in Damascus and then, after leaving Baghdad, being socialist inclined, worked in Beirut on the editorial board of *Worker's Conscious*. It is said that there he published a collection of short stories entitled *Al-Qatala (The Killers)*. They remember that he participated as a guest at the first Mirbad International Poetry Festival, which took place every year in Iraq for around two and half decades, where on numerous occasions some Yugoslav poets also took part. After some years had passed, he returned home and today he reportedly lives in Saudi Arabia, although nobody knows his exact address. In an interview for French television at the end of the 1970s, Abdul Sattar Nassir stated that amongst all of the far Arab East's short story writers, Bakhishwin was the only one to have truly impressed him, although at that time he knew virtually nothing about him as an individual.

At this time, from a relatively reliable perspective, all that we know about Bakhishwin's life is a few facts - if those are indeed facts at all. The conviction felt by his fellow members of Iraq's literary circles, that he and Hakam are one and the same person, has lead me since 1995 in search of Bakhishwin's stories. Until this very day I have not found even one of them, be that printed in magazines, in the bookshops of Cairo, Kuwait and Aman, or amongst the pavement vendors of Baghdad's Mutanabbi street where in recent years Iraqi writers have laid out their own personal libraries. I never received any replies from the editors of cultural columns in Arabic language newspapers in both London and New York in response to several queries I made by email. The promises which I received from Iraqi writers that they would put me in touch with Bakhishwin through their private contacts have not to this day been fulfilled. Moreover, neither Abdullah Bakhishwin nor Abdullah Hakam are to be found amongst the names of Arabic authors whose translated works sit upon the virtual shelves of Amazon, the world's largest internet bookshop.

But, the story about the countless *individuals* going under the name of Ali ibn Alwan looks to me like a compelling enough motive for me to carry on searching. And I do this, not losing hope that at the end of this search we might be able to read another story by the same author who wrote this extraordinary work, whatever he is called and whatever name he might publish under.

Zemun, August 1999.

Epilogue?

I yesterday received from Cairo three new books belonging to a large circulation Arabic series via a traveller in the region. Each of them is already in its second or third print run. The first is a novella, while the other two are collections of short stories. One of these collections, *Tales from the Gulf*, a selection of works by renowned writers hailing from various countries of the remotest Arab East, arrived to me still smelling of the print room out of which it emerged with the help of UNESCO's *Books for All* programme. The twelfth of the twenty-three stories in *Tales from the Gulf* is called *A Song for Death, a Song for Lunacy*, and its author is Abdullah Bakhishwin.

The story tells the tale of a hopeless marriage proposal which is undermined by the elitist arrogance of her father and the jealousy of the bride to be's drunken brothers, and then follows the sorrowful proposer who himself gets drunk and spends the night in gaol, since Saudi Arabia's Sharia law strictly forbids drinking alcohol, from where he is saved by a friend who has connections in the police force. Because of her unhappy love, the girl commits suicide in a mythical way - she just heads off into the desert and is never to be seen or heard of again. The story is well written, in a somewhat bare language and pure style, but it does not have the power to irresistibly compel me to translate it (all I can say is that it is just missing "that special something").

In the meagre notes about the author on page 79, I read: "Born 1372 (after the Hijra, thus 1951 or 1952) in Ta'if; published a collection of short stories entitled *The Celebration*, 1405."

Zemun, 20th November 2000.

The Internet or the Mother of Networks

While completing the final editing of text for the book *12 Impossibles* and checking over the information in the notes about Abdullah Hakam, who might be, but equally might not be, Abdullah Bakhishwin, I notice that midnight is fast approaching and remember that I should immediately check my emails because of some work I have planned for the following day. I turn my internet connection on and, all of a sudden, as though somebody had switched me to different operating mode, I go on to *Google* and in Arabic letters type in *Abdullah+Bakhishwin*.

A mere coincidence is sometimes better than a thousand agreements, according to one Arabic proverb. The name I sought now appeared at several addresses. On the site of Saudi intellectuals (<http://www.riyadh.org.sa/intellectuals.html>), last updated back in 2000, I found his full name, which itself offers more than I could have ever hoped for: Abdullah Hakam Hasan Bakhishwin. Born in Ta'if, in 1372 according to Hijra. He completed primary school. He had a cultural column in the journal *Iqra' (Read)*, and afterwards worked as a director of the Culture Office within the Gulf Cooperation Council. He was involved in some quite controversial wranglings with local scribomaniacs who pay huge sums to prominent local publishers for them to publish their books. In 1405 he published a collection of short stories, *Solemnity*, along with many other stories and articles in literary magazines. He participated in a number of meetings with other authors, literary evenings and festivals, both in his homeland and in other Arab states. Several years ago he devoted himself to his own private business, although he does continue to write, particularly reviews for newspapers and magazines. Address: 21342 Jeddah, PO Box 5919.

Belgrade, 26th April 2004.

POST SCRIPTUM

Post scriptum

This little selection of forbidden or in many other ways censured and harshly criticised stories from contemporary Arab writers from the “middle generation” should, according to initial thought, bear the terse title *12*. The reason for this was not just that it is composed of twelve primary “entries” (without taking into account the essayistic notes that support these stories – whilst they are in some respect “entries”, they are not independent but rather *support*), but also that such a title manages to tickle everybody’s curiosity because it is enigmatic in a concise and ethereal way. I believed that this coded title, should it gain the favour of readers, especially those inclined towards numerology, and maybe even the political esotericism, could produce a favourable marketing effect, which on its own would allow for these Arabic stories and their writers to reach a wider audience and offer them the recognition which they undeniably deserve. I adamantly believe that this line of reasoning was not without a firm grounding, the number twelve being an apostolic and contiguous number, a symbolic form of time and the feminine principle. It is also one of the perfect numbers which in Eastern mysticism and theory of numbers are attributed formidable powers.

Considerable powers had likewise been attributed to all of these “dangerous” stories containing a grim image of the times, since darkneses are scared to death when faced with their own image in the mirror and because the tyrants know that people who read just for the relish of reading, inevitably see apostles of faith in the light and mankind in their authors, almost just as clearly as the tyrants themselves see it.

That which comes after twelve is a secret and a taboo. The Anglo-Saxons, who still count in dozens and whose hotels never have a room 13, still to this day believe in this just as strongly as the Babylonians once did, and they are not alone in this. Far from it! There can hardly be a single person who has not at some point felt a desire to believe in such things. The majority of us, therefore, would say that twelve stories is a full measure. And there are umpteen reasons for this.

First and foremost, the time of devoting oneself to reading great big thick books is already something which belongs to the past. It is by far and away more pleasant to take on a nice little thin book containing just a few interesting stories. On the other hand, although there are not very few rebellious Arab writers, it has to be admitted that not quite many of them are virtuosos when it comes to writing short stories, while opportunities for them to get such works published in well respected magazines and books are just as unattainable. As such, it is not easy to find truly brilliant

Arabic stories which are resolutely against totalitarian regimes in general and the ruling despotic clans and individuals in particular. In any case, what I had in mind was that by means of the forbidden substance flowing from the pens of prose authors who are trained to write from right to left, I should complete those first twelve of the set of the natural numbers, to present the taboo words (and thoughts) of one part of the Orient in an unobtrusive (ideal?) quantity which suggests fullness and, possibly, the beginning of the end of an era.

I then thought that the book could just as equally be called *13* because my notes are themselves a story as well. The very emphasising of the *forbidden sign* like a flag in the form of the title, attractively framed in an arabesque design on the book's front cover, the collection of "unacceptable" stories would become more consistent in as much as would be even more provocative.

Thus, it seems to be just one further step to the comfortable thought that the book could actually be entitled with any number. In fact, why is it not called *14*, *17* or *20*? Such randomness could produce an even stronger effect of enigmatic lure – and this does not even begin to speak about the advantages of the noble number 24! (As the majority of people know, twenty-four is twice as strong as twelve, this being the reason why the various nations of Central Asia and Levant took it as the mark of utmost purity for gold, as well as the experience of exceptional delight, both physical and spiritual). Finally, there are many more numbers that hide their own peculiarities, interesting stories and even whole legends of mathematical sorcery within themselves.

However, the number of units in a book must be formed firstly as a function of the concept and the content which is on offer – all other ways are false. My concept (even though actually I was not initially aware of it) understood that all stories, no matter whether they contain elements of magical realism, whether they do not play with esoteric visions, should be of the kind which goes against the grain of authority, but also that they should speak neither of the influence of the stars nor of the secret meanings of numbers.

Thus, it was more logical to seek my title in the world of words. Finally, what number of stories will eventually enter into a collection is not, on a practical level, just a case the editor outlining what he wants (and less still the translator whose entire activity is suspicious *per definitionem*, even if these two figures are united in the body of one person), but rather most of all the decision comes from those who initially consider the project, then accept it and, when push comes to shove, are ready to risk money on it (be that someone else's or, by God, their own).

In my attempt to imagine a publisher who might be interested in this collection of *problematic* stories, as it were *impossible* stories, I gave the number twelve featured in the title one of those seemingly disagreeable adjectives, but actually one which is straight to the point, no longer taking into consideration the real number of stories which would be in the book. Once the reader believes in the declaration of the amount on the front page, no deviation of the state of facts will induce him to accept that state as the actual one – in the worst case scenario he will notice those facts quickly and then forget them just as quickly, and the book will still keep its title.

We all know what the inevitable outcome of the battle between an established belief and a knowledge of facts is.

When, as it was expected, the powerful number 12 (supported by the colloquial tone depicted in the genitive plural of *the adjective impossible* positioned so as to designate human beings)⁵³ prevailed, by its own quality, over all quantitative perplexities, there remained only to perform one more overview of the content of this small but ferocious book, so as to present something which alongside a great deal of optimism may perhaps be called *the personal poetics of translation*.

These stories were translated over a period of twelve years as I came across them (more or less in the same order in which they are to be found in the collection). Arabic translators do not get sent mainstream hits by publishing houses but rather must themselves show persistence and dedication in the hunt for good stories. Always with a fresh sense of hope, you start (and quickly cease) reading countless poor stories and, on top of this, read around twenty or so mediocre works all the way through, until eventually you come across one which you consider worthy of the effort associated with the translation and which is likely to subsequently bring joy to its readers.⁵⁴

I have always insisted upon only recognising the authority of the text, not the authority of whichever name is printed either above or below it. All of the stories in this collection are the pearls

⁵³ At the same time, this brings us to think about famous titles such as *12 Angry Men*, *Seven Samurai*, *The Dirty Dozen* and perhaps *The Untouchables*, etc. Here though, we are concerned with twelve heroic stories rather than with that number of heroic writer characters, which in this case is actually only nine, hailing from seven Arab countries – two more members from the set of excellent numbers charged with symbolism.

⁵⁴ Taking everything into account, this is a consequence of the state of contemporary Arab prose, the genre structure of which does not have autochthonous roots. Arabs write in a language which has both a lexicon and a grammar greatly different from their spoken vernaculars. Thus, many who master this language believe that it forces them to write with one eye focussed on the West (Europe, Russia, and America) and the other on their celebrated classics, marked by mass imitation, cordial narration and an unbearable dose of well-intentioned explication. The writer thus comprehensively interprets every suggested emotion of his characters. The exception to this can be seen in different “symbolists” and “modernists” through their willingly undertaken mission, as they considerably refrain from the elaboration of such details, however it is often impossible to draw any sense of meaning from their texts.

of short prose. Some of them flowed from the pens of very well-known writers, but almost half of them were written by people who did not experience fame in any way, be it a blessing or a curse, or maybe even both, even though these stories would suggest that they deserved at least part of it.

Some of these stories were found in magazines and newspapers. Squeezing through the sieve of censorship much like a camel through the eye of a needle, they were a cause for the break-up of editorial boards, the removal of editors, the public banning of books (if, of course, they had even managed to get in any of them in the first place), the imprisonment of authors or their placement on secret black lists. The careful reader will notice that the lives and fates of some authors mix in with one another in several of this collection's stories.

Sometimes, noticed the common man long ago, even the blind hen can still find the grain. But none of the Arab writers whose stories we read here should be looked upon as a blind hen. Some of them are lions (who can be easily recognised by their claws, such as Tamir and Nassir), some are wolves and she-wolves and some are “old dogs”. Some, it could be said, are just strutting cockerels who cry out a couple of cock-a-doodle-dos (like Ajami), but just abandon their blind work when threatened by the police's stew pot.

And let them just be themselves. It is better to have released a single good story rather than one hundred mediocre ones.

All of these writers are, in some respect, poets who celebrate prosaic expression, but they do not forget that, with their words, they celebrate above everything else the human freedom beneath the insane oppression of absolutist regimes and ancient but cruel social tradition which conceited eurocentrism is all too willing to dismiss as backwards Asian despotism.

It is not a miracle, therefore, that none of the authors found in this collection are academics, or diplomats, or even professors of literature. One was a blacksmith's journeyman, another a television presenter, one a teacher, another a painter, and one other was even had a PhD in Safety at work. Some, as is often said, *studied*. The majority, however, are self-taught, because they learned the writer's trade – which, by the way, is not officially deemed a trade at all – exclusively by reading and, filled with a joyful anxiety, writing that which they desired somebody else who is also brave would have written.

They did not need to go to school for this, nor get diplomas, nor even to have gained

previously a high literary reputation. Their stories serve as their literary diplomas. The majority of Arab writers who have already cemented their reputations are willing to touch on “social topics”, but all of them wisely fall silent, or fell silent, for the whole of their lives when faced with the most horrible crimes of domestic tyrants.⁵⁵ Maybe they did this precisely because of their cemented reputations and too much schooling?

The writers of most stories in this collection belong to a different breed. They are the type who shout out “Down with schools!”. In *The Devil’s Dictionary*, next to the entry for *Man*, the nutty Ambrose Bierce wrote “An animal so lost in rapturous contemplation of what he thinks he is as to overlook what he indubitably ought to be”, and under *Erudition* he put “Dust shaken out of a book into an empty skull”, whilst he did not even consider the word *School* to be worthy of an entry. Truth, it seems, is more commonly found when one strays from beaten track. The method by which these writers achieved their schooling can be best expressed in the saying “nobody has ever learned anything which one has not learned by himself”, and their most important lessons were undertaken when they had a hunger in their bellies, their books were banned, their jobs taken away from them or they were cast into prison without a trial. And the cementing of their reputations rests as much in the shock they elicit in their Arab readers from the perspective that somebody would even dare to write such things as it does in the quality of the works.

Translating these stories, I could not resist the desire to say a few words about the circumstances in which they were created and existed, but not just about places, dates of birth and the other main works by the authors. How to deliver these jewels to readers who for the most part have not even heard of their creators, and not tell them those other sparkling *stories about stories* which simply flutter beneath their titles?! That is why I outfitted them, wherever I could, not only with the necessary, standard props but also with those other *stories from the background*, believing that the reader will gladly play with such material, and that they would otherwise remain less remarkable than they deserve.

I constructed these notes in much the same way as I read them and recognised inside me the stories themselves and their fates. Some are extensive and fall into the sphere of the essay, while others are very short, in some respect even quite barren it might be said. This does not contribute to a sense of balance but it does impartially bear witness concerning the various possibilities of presentation dependent upon the moment and level of awareness about events and the potential

⁵⁵ So this collection of stories is lacking the most illustrious names from the canon of Arabic literature: Khalil Gibran, Naguib Mahfouz, Mahmoud Taymur, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Yusuf Idris – all excellent writers who enjoyed the state footing the bill for the printing of their collected works which make whole mountains of books.

projections which a literary work, however short, can have in the real world – and also on its path into this world.

Translating is one of those acts in which the two aspects of our being, language and thought/feeling are most consistently matched and equalised. I will not credit anybody else with the praise for this little thought in an attempt to gain greater credence for it, rather I shall modestly accept the credit for it myself: translating is *pure esotericism*. Reading translations, people often feel, but in no way recognise, that this is how it is. For this reason, alongside some of these translations, it was necessary to talk about the act of translating itself. Whoever wishes can easily skip over these parts; but whoever is just as interested in this aspect as in the stories themselves will maybe find more enjoyment on these supplementary pages than in a game of whist at the seaside, or in playing blitz chess against a well matched opponent, or in an empty crossword. I hope that this is possible.

Those who persuaded me to collect these works (which I did not actually do with these stories, or maybe only in part) will not bear the responsibility. It lies with myself and, but of course, with my publisher, who by some miracle was found (it is said that miracles can happen and, judging by this case, that is true). The synopsis which has been adopted offered a series of twelve pictures. However, it would be a sin to miss this chance, with the help of this current additional number (very, very cunningly labeled with its Latin name *Post scriptum*), to break through the boundary and enter into the dark domain of the forbidden and hence already thrilling number 13.

And you are all free to think and believe whatever you wish.

Zemun, August 2000/

Belgrade, March 2004.

Srpko Leštarić