Loss and Memory: The Exilic Nihilism of Wadī' Sa'ādah, Australia's Lebanese Émigré Poet

Clarissa Burt

United States Naval Academy

Abstract

Wadī' Sa'ādah, poet of the new Lebanese Mahjar, writes the loss and alienation which have been salient features of the experience the generation who came of age in the early 1970s and witnessed the horrors of recent Lebanese history. In his inimitable prose-poetic style, he documents the existential vortex which draws him in, but from which his poems escape as exquisite flares shot from afar, illuminating for us brilliantly, briefly where he has gone, tracers of personal, generational, and historical dissolution.

Keywords

Wadī' Sa'ādah; poetry; Mahjar; alienation; loss

The remarkable prose poetry of Wadī' Sa'ādah (b. 1948), emanating from the horrors of civil war in Beirut and the experience of emigration, has been first and foremost elegiac, articulating an attempted (but impossible) reconstruction of what has been lost. In his more recent poetry collections, he constructs the internal geography of alienation and loss arising from exilic remoteness in time and space and the inescapable emotional burden of memory. Sa'ādah's work is both important in its own right, and also as an example of the new Mahjar/emigration poetry in Arabic. For just as Gibran's émigré literature has had profound influence on contemporary Arabic literature as a whole,¹ and has also spoken to the world at large, so the literature of the current Mahjar/Arabic diaspora may bespeak and break open Arabic literary discourse to new voices of dissent, conscience, and awareness of the depths of human experience, whose audience includes and exceeds the Arab world. The

This paper is dedicated to Roger Allen, whose tireless efforts in the field of Arabic literature have constantly opened corners of the world of modern Arabic literary production as yet unexplored by Western scholarship, to reveal to us new treasures he has discovered.

¹ Gibran Kahlil Gibran (Jubrān Khalil Jibrān, d. 1931) wrote extensively in both English and Arabic. See *al-Majmū'ah al-kāmilah li-mū'allafāt Jubrān Khalil Jubrān*, ed. Mikhā'il

work of this émigré Lebanese poet speaks to the universality of exile, emerging from an Arab experience, but reaching to the heart of the human condition. In this article I offer translation, commentary and initial analysis of selections from two of Sa'adah's works: *Naṣṣ al-ghiyāb* (Text of Absence, 1999) and *Ghubār* (Dust, 2001).

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Born in 1948 in a small village in the mountains of Lebanon, Wadī Sa'adah worked as a journalist in Beirut, until he emigrated to Australia in 1988 to escape the Lebanese civil war and its aftermath. His poetic production to date includes eight volumes of poetry and writings, several of which he self-published.² The works from the last decade, however, have all been published by Lebanese presses, and have gained Sa'adah an international following among readers of Arabic poetry. In particular, *Bi-sababi ghaymatin 'alā al-arjaḥ* (Most Likely Due to a Cloud, 1992) and *Muḥāwalat waṣl diffātayni bi-ṣawt* (Attempt to Connect Two Shores with Sound, 1997) have made Sa'adah a figure of growing importance, and placed him on the broader cultural map—a Lebanese poet producing remarkable work in the self-imposed exile of an immigrant in Australia. Both these volumes are profoundly elegiac, featuring bone-wrenching songs of loss which also articulate the experience of existential disintegration, and construct the internal geography of alienation and loss arising from exilic remoteness in time and space, and the inescapable emotional burden of memory. Written in Sydney, they have also garnered the attention of Australian readers of Arabic poetry, and selections have been translated into English and published in Australia.³

Nu'aymah, 4th ed. (Beirut: Nobilis; Dār Ṣādir, 1997), and Gibran Kahlil Gibran, *The Collected Works* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

² Wadī Sa'adah's books include: *Laysa lil-masā' ikhwah* [Evening has no Brothers] (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-Jam'iyyah lil-Dirāsāt wal-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī', 1981); *al-Miyāḥ, al-miyāḥ* [Water, Water] ([?]: private publication, 1983); *Qabḍ riḥ* [A Grasp of Wind] (Beirut: Dar Mārūn 'Abbūd, 1983); *Rajul fi hawā' musta'mal yaq'ad wa-yufakkir fi al-ḥayawānāt* [A Man in Reused Air Sits and Thinks of Animals] ([?]: private publication, 1985); *Maq'ad rākiḥ ghadara al-bās* [The Seat of a Rider Who'd Left the Bus] ([?]: private publication, 1987); *Bi-sabab ghaymatin 'alā al-arjaḥ* [Most Likely Due to a Cloud] (Beirut: Dār al-Jadīd, 1992); *Muḥāwalat waṣl diffātayni bi-ṣawt* [Attempt to Connect Two Shores With Sound] (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār lil-Nashr, 1997); *Naṣṣ al-ghiyāb* [Text of Absence] (Beirut: Dār al-Masār lil-Nashr wal-Abḥāth wal-Tawḥīq, 1999); *Ghubār* [Dust] (Beirut: Dār al-Masār lil-Nashr wal-Abḥāth wal-Tawḥīq, 2001). Full bibliographic information, as well as texts of the poetry, and some translations are accessible at the poet's website: <www4.webng.com/wadihSaadeh>. All translations are mine.

³ See Wadih [sic] Sa'adeh, tr. Anne Fairbairn (Charnwood, A.C.T. [Australia]: Ginninderra Press, 1997), a whole volume of Sa'adah's poetry in English; more recently, numerous selections

The nihilist twist in Sa'adah's work continues and expands in *Text of Absence* and *Dust*, with strong indictments of betrayal leveled against writing itself. Like an auto-immune disorder, Sa'adah's writing accuses, denigrates, cannibalizes and obliterates itself. Writing as a hoped-for instrument of transcendence does not deliver from suffering, but confirms it, through its yearnings for an imagined different existence. If the earlier volumes had a strong elegiac tone, concomitant with confusion between the poetic persona and the object of mourning, these recent volumes seem to have a stronger relation to, and articulation of, the experience of loss through archetypal emigration, and a strong conviction of alienation as a core human experience. The nihilistic character of these writings makes the writing project itself not only suspect, but self-fulfillingly self-destructive. The works could be read as long suicide notes by the poetic voice.

Wrestling with writing as treacherous for the hopes and aims of the writer was a topic Sa'adah first broached in *Attempt to Connect Two Shores with Sound*, but is revisited at length in *Text of Absence* and *Dust*, documenting an intellectual and emotional process which resulted in Sa'adah's publicly forswearing writing and publication on a trip to Cairo in 2002.⁴ In *Text of Absence*, Sa'adah lays out his case against writing, predicting and justifying in advance his subsequent silence. This is signaled by the inscription following the title page of *Text of Absence*.⁵

They are Last Words... Here I leave them behind.

The phrase "last words" is an eerie reminder of a person's last words before death, like a last will and testament; but Sa'adah clarifies in the body of the volume that his departure from writing is an attempt to escape into life. For Sa'adah, writing falsely offers hope, but in fact connects to loss and to death:

of his work have been translated in *Mood Lightning: an anthology*, ed. Ten Ch'in Ü (Pennant Hills, New South Wales: Imaginal Press, 2004).

⁴ In November 2002. The poet told me of this decision, and declared it publicly as well; cf. Muhammad Shu'ayr, "Naḥnu Jamī'an Manfiyūn," *Akḥbār al-Adab* 485 (27 October 2002) 6; 'Ablah al-Ruwaynī, "Al-'Adamī... yaskun al-ward," *Akḥbār al-Adab* 487 (10 November 2002), p. 6; Muḥammad al-Kafrāwī, "Na'am... Anā Shā'ir Ka'ib... wa-la yūjad shā'ir laysa kadhālik," *al-Qābirah* 139 (10 December 2002), p. 5. Happily, Sa'adah survived his writing-suicidal episode and has recently published two works: *Ratq al-hawā'* [Darning Air] (Beirut: Dār al-Nahār lil-Nashr, 2006) and *Tarkib ākhar li-ḥayāt Wadī' Sa'adah* [Another Set-up for Wadī' Sa'adah's Life] (2006). See also *al-A'māl al-shi'riyyah* [Complete Poems] (Beirut: Dār al-Nahḍah al-'Arabiyyah lil-Ṭibā'ah wal-Nashr, 2008).

⁵ Sa'adah, *Nass al-ghiyāb*, p. 5 (hereafter cited by page number).

Text of Absence

Do I say farewell to writing?

I say farewell.

The dialogue of writing is the dialogue of silence. The time of writing is the time of absence. The place of writing is non-place.

There is no life in words

Life may be there, outside them . . . (7)

We do not discover if the poetic persona finds life outside of writing, for as readers we are stuck within the record of the medium itself. Nonetheless, Sa'adah is vehement in his paradoxical, self-reflective attack on writing. He articulates the hopes of many writers to find solace or a home in writing, in contrast to the experience of alienation, only to be confronted by the reality of writing as delusion, a form of non-living.

A delusional search for a delusional life—writing.

Being able to conjure absence with a text is not true.

Neither [conjuring] the living nor the dead.

What I believed about the long journey of this delusion, is not true.

Absence is non-being and death is non-being. It is not possible to conjure either of them. We become absence; we become death in the journey of this delusion.

Writing—a synonym for death.

I used to think that I would build an existence from imagination. That imagining would transform imagination into body, and words would build a house, which I would be *in*, not out in front facing it.

I went a long way in the imagination of language, until I was broken in its delusion. I went along in language searching for my native place, until I discovered that I was searching for a delusion. Because language was my native place, I had only dwelt in absence . . . (10)

As writing did not fulfill the promise of offering a home, a place to call one's own, of creating a sense of belonging, so Sa'adah's poetic persona rages against what he has lost in his existential exile, including his very self. The poetic persona declares himself lost in an existential whirlwind, as if his recognizable life had been snatched from him. The emphasis is not on the place of exile, but the metaphysical experience of being without bearings, and having been dispossessed (21 ff). Thus, there are no recognizable geographic specifics in this writing that relate to either the lost homeland, or the adopted home, no specifics that clue us into the writer's surroundings in Australia—only the internal experience of exile.

Language is an intimate part of Sa'adah's personal and cultural conundrum. As an exile, his and his children's relationship with their language of heritage

is in question. Parallel to the experience of many exiles in foreign lands, what may once have been a source of pride can now be a liability. Consciously or otherwise, exiles and their children make decisions concerning their use of language and identity. Exile displaces one from the primal linguistic community, and often negates the utility of the native language in day-to-day life. Some immigrants, particularly second-generation ones, replace the émigré's language with the language of the new place, creating a generational linguistic dislocation within the family. The language isolation of the émigré may then be compounded by his language isolation within his own family, exacerbating feelings of futility. The nihilistic images here include a violent severance from one's past and one's community of origin.

No one lives but those who have forgotten the language of their grandparents.
The ones who have broken the glass of memory, and thrown themselves in the river.
The ones who blasted the sacred sanctuaries to smithereens, and walked into the pathless maze

No one lives except the one[s] who tossed their parents in wells.

I tossed no one in the well, and I broke nothing. Am I dead, then? (35)

The fact that Sa'adah's poetic persona has not yet discarded his language and his relationship with his past makes him question his own continued existence, and the very meaning and cause of existence. Using allusions to the Bible, like a nihilist Jibran or a Lebanese Nietzsche, Sa'adah's poetic persona at first questions creation and creator, and then describes creation as faulty at its basis, thereby casting aspersions at the Creator Himself. Sa'adah had offered other nihilistic rewritings of creation texts in *Attempt to Connect the Two Shores with Sound*,⁶ but here, the self-reflective violence of his nihilism emerges the poetic persona, whose language accuses, confounds, condemns and destroys:

He thought that he came to stay, and not to walk along. If he had to be walking along all the time, and to tire his feet out so, in vain, why, then had he come? Walking isn't sufficient justification for being born. There was a sin that happened, no doubt; and it begot a long chain of events of sin. In the beginning was not the word, then, nor God, but sin. And sin begot sins. Among which was the universe.

⁶ Sa'adah, *Muhāwalat*, pp. 65-75 ("In the beginning was delusion... In the beginning was delusion and delusion became flesh and came down among us...")

How could One of complete perfection create a universe with this horrific defect? It is said that existence is in His image. Where is He, I want to see Him? I want to know if He really is that repulsive.

The sin is our emanation, and our place. It is our language and our speaker, in whose larynx is a bomb about to explode, a confused world which does not know where to bury her inhabitants. (47 ff.)

This inherent danger of carrying language, of packing it like a weapon, of logos-performance, can only be avoided by escaping language. Perhaps, as with second-generation immigrants then this can be accomplished by leaving behind the language of the native land, of the departed, of the past and memory. Perhaps then the death in language could be avoided, or eased, and one could experience existence on the sly, away from the ties and encumbrances of language, culture and society. The poetic persona imagines a world of people

with no voices, so that those coming do not inherit the language of those departing. And the one coming would be free of the speech of the one going, and create his language himself, while the one departing would go easily because he leaves no encumbrance.

So that no one be the son of anyone, and there be no forefathers.

A universe that comes to you furtively without your seeing it, and from which you go furtively, without it seeing you. (50)

This imagined world of the non-speaking, of those dispensing with language, without ties, however, does not exist. For we bear our heritage of language with us. Letting go of language, moreover, is a further loss not to be swallowed easily. For language is itself the legacy of one's forebears, a precious artifact of symbolic significance, a memento to be treasured and preserved on one's journey through life, tying back to one's origin. Because of its connective function, it may seem the ideal instrument or companion for combatting the onslaughts, or resisting the predations of existential exile.⁷

In an ancient cloak I wrap words, and take them with me as a companion of the way. The cloak itself which my father carried, the very one which my grandfathers bore. (54)

But the treachery of language is also inescapable for Sa'ādah. Like a latter-day Demosthenes, his poetic persona tries to bend the logos-creative instrument

⁷ *Naṣṣ al-ghiyāb*, p. 54.

of word to his will, only to be frustrated by his failure to produce the desired results. The attempt to use language to construct a life in the poetic persona's existential exile, however, is thwarted by its very connective function, which only connects to what was, to what is now lost, to the intangibles of imagination and to the broken fragments of one's own self and one's former world. The instrument of language, then, according to Sa'adah's poetic persona, can now only exhibit the tatters of a previous existence:

With the few stones which are in my mouth, I try to build a life after I had laid down many days of death. I try to devise words that are not the indication of their opposite. That, when they emerge from my mouth, they are not a desire to speak but an enactment of that desire. I try, when I say "fish," that a fish come to me; when I say "companion," that my desire become flesh, and I see the companion; and when I say "heart," that there come to me the flower-seller. But, in order for that to be, isn't it necessary to change the chemistry of words and to change the chemistry of those uttering them as well?

Or is it that language isn't desire or action. But the scattered fragments remaining of our shattered essential selves? (55)

Just as Sa'adah never furnishes us with concrete details which can link his text with concrete specifics of place, or individuals, so he never names the poetic persona's specific language. While the complete lack of specificity make his nihilistic discourse generalizable, and consequently universally applicable to human experiences which inspire such nihilistic attitudes, there are, nonetheless, phrases which do point to the cultural values surrounding Arabic, only to condemn it: "When the words enter into there, their meanings become one, they become the Beautiful Language: the language of non-being" (58). Likewise, the poetic persona links between language, discourse, and violence, opening an opportunity for us to speculate about Sa'adah's linking between certain discourses and the violence he may have witnessed in the conflicts in his native Beirut, in the Arab world, and the world at large today:

There is certain death in speech. Obvious blood.
There is a wadi and stones, and bodies thrown down on them.
There is killing, atrocious killing, in language.
We dwell in a massacre. (59)

In his treatment of the existential betrayal and the ineffectualness of language, moreover, Sa'adah employs a major trope derived directly from classical Arabic poetry, casting the human spirit in the role of the feminine inamorata of the prelude of the classical ode, in which the poet mourns the loss of his beloved through forced separation or her intentional withdrawal, as his

memory of her is triggered by the traces of the abandoned campsite of her tribe and he remembers his experience of her in days gone by. Thus Sa'adah returns to a strong elegiac tone, mourning the past and all that is lost from other times and spaces, but also his own love of self, his own élan, verve and spirit. These losses are compounded by his impotence even to effectually chronicle all that was.

The tribe of the spirit is departing; she packed up her bags and went, on the final journey.

A journey in which none remained except the last of the defeated. Some of her people died; some of her people were killed, and others left her behind. None of her asses or dogs was still walking. The spirit's tribe has gone extinct.

Whoever was here witnessed that the spirit was beautiful. She would dance under the light of candles and sing, and magic would descend on the guests from her glances. Whoever was here witnessed, but the tribe departed, and even the guests are no longer with us.

The tribe of the spirit bade farewell to the last of her friends crouching in the corner, and absented itself.

And it was up to me, the one crouching in the corner, to record the last of her footsteps at least, the last of her glances, but I failed, even in the recording of this absence.

Neither is presence present, nor can one pick absence up like an artifact; One even can't describe it or write it. How, then, do I write the text of absence? (64 ff.)

This ineffectualness of the poetic persona to articulate in language or in writing the comprehensive losses he has suffered ushers in one last attempt alchemically to transform reality using delusion to transcend suffering. This leads to the dissolution of all distinctions, sweeping up the poetic persona himself into a whirlwind of primordial dissolution, leading also to the dissolution of the text, which ends with the poetic persona's own obliteration:⁸

A terrible insanity swept away everything; even opposites have mixed together, and colors and distances have blended. So there's no longer color or distance, no round nor rectangular, for everything has come to be in the focal point of the circle, no beginning and no end, no enemies and no friends; the slain embraced their murderers, so there are no dead and no living...
Everything becomes the same, here in my head...

I fly lightly, triumphing over the weight of my elements, and the weight of history, and the weight of place, and the weight of things. I fly with the elements of my desire: with the absence of desire, and the absence of elements...

⁸ *Naṣṣ al-ghiyāb*, pp. 68-70.

I fly triumphantly over creation . . .
 I fly, fly, and go far off
 I become a speck wiped away . . . and disappear. (68-70)

In this fashion, as foreshadowed in *Attempt to Connect Two Shores with Sound*,⁹ Sa'adah's text effectively consumes itself, bringing about its own disintegration. If we continue our comparison with Nietzsche, Sa'adah does not succeed, through the absence of will, to head in the direction of the *Übermensch* in the face of the predations of existence, but rather takes the direction of (self)obliteration. The final dissolution into delusion, madness, and disintegration are literarily reminiscent of Nietzsche's actual madness as the culmination of his own confrontation between his reality and his nihilistic existentialism. The text of *Text of Absence* does invite careful comparison with the works of Nietzsche,¹⁰ as there are many similarities in their discourses. The nihilistic tendencies in Sa'adah's work are quite pronounced, but have none of the hubris and pomp of Nietzsche's will to power and his superman. Sa'adah chooses instead the disintegration of his text and literary self-obliteration.

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In the later *Dust* (2001), Sa'adah gives us texts even more directly related to the theme of exile and suicide—short, titled nihilistic contemplations of the experience of concrete and spiritual exile, transitory existence, emotional death, alienation and language, and absenting the self. Again, he attempts desperately in these texts to find a means to transcend the pain of existential alienation. He champions the idea of the metaphysically transitory, of unbelonging as a benign and beneficent mode of life, by virtue of its lack of

⁹ Cf. Clarissa Burt, "Connecting Two Shores with Sound: Sa'adeh's World of Loss," *Edebiyat* 14/1-2 (2003), pp. 133-147.

¹⁰ And several of Nietzsche's works invite comparison with Sa'adah's texts, for their aphoristic style, and content, including "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (1873), *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-85), and *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886). See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1992); and *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: The Viking Press, 1968). I benefited greatly from Robert Wicks, "Friedrich Nietzsche," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <plato.stanford.edu/entries/Nietzsche> and Alan Pratt, "Nihilism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <www.utm.edu/research/iep/n/nihilism.htm> (both first accessed December 8, 2003).

entanglements. Here is Sa'ādah's version of *Übermensch*, the rootless wanderer who is above or beyond the harmfulness of human involvement.¹¹

The One passing through quickly is like an emigrating angel. Leaving no residence which could be a place for a sin, committing no sin, committing no act of abiding.

Quickly under a sun which touches him not, under rain which wets him not, atop dirt which leaves no trace on him, quickly with no trace and no heritage and no legacy.

He didn't stay enough to learn a language. He didn't stay to absorb customs. He has no language and no customs, no masters and no apprentices,

One passing through is beyond language, beyond customs, beyond ranks, names and emulation...

With no anxiety, with no regret, and no gods and no adherents. They have one faith: Passing through.

The ones abandoning places and native lands and parents and sons. The ones breaking the bond. The ones ruining the gallows made of the iron of place, time, and belonging.

They collapse one after the other, those who hold fast to abiding. They collapse upon their native lands which have become delusion. Upon their sense of belonging, which has become a lie. On their parental feeling which has become a burden, on their faiths which kill us and kill them and kill life.

The ones passing through have no victims. Is it thus that in order to glorify life, we must glorify its passage in haste, that we glorify suicide?

This transcendence, then, is linked to abandonment of home and family, and to suicide, as a means to achieve the necessary transitoriness; for the alternative, of abiding in a place or home or family or society, collapses into illusion. Departing, with all its metaphorical associations with death, may offer a way to this transcendence and to freedom and life. Memory, however, hinders that escape. The most enviable and desirable position, from this point of view, is absence:

Memory hampers those who wish for death. It makes dead those desirous of life. Let's bury it, then.

Let's bury memory as we sing

It's a ridiculous celebration in any case, but in view of the fact that we've arrived, let's sing and dance.

¹¹ Sa'ādah, *Ghubār*, pp. 10 ff (hereafter cited by page number). Sa'ādah uses the preposition *fawqa*, "above/beyond," often in this passage, indicating how the transitory transcends all social accoutrements.

For a few seconds in which we may be beautiful
But the most beautiful of us will remain: the absent one. (15 ff.)

As in *Text of Absence*, however, language is unavoidably implicated as a factor in the success or failure of any attempt at transcendence through the absenting of the self. According to Sa'adah's poetic persona, the transitory is beyond/above language and custom. Language itself, as an ephemeral and transitory medium nonetheless connects and communicates across space and time. But, as we saw above, it betrays by comprising shadowy delusion and memory of what is lost. In this fashion there is an identification between the poetic persona and discourse, for Sa'adah is suggesting that both he and discourse should pass on. Transcendence, then, must be beyond place and language:

Talking is the betrayal of place.
And place is the betrayal of speech.
So let me pass on; then I'd have no speech or place
I was shadow; I was treacherous speech
So let me pass on. (12)

The relationship between the exilic crisis and language is further exposed, for the poetic persona declares language as a place, instrument and performance of exile. Primordial language may have been the living hope of connection, but in practice it has in fact led inexorably to isolation and destruction. Despite the delusion of communication, Sa'adah finds that language confirms our alienation and loneliness. Echoing the argument from *Text of Absence*, the poet implies that only outside of language might one find life.

Exile of Language

If language was truly our home, we are living in exile.
Isn't it what we used to speak with ourselves, not with others?
And there is no interconnection/communion—not with our inner self nor with the other.
Language is a private matter, not a public matter. We speak in order to be convinced, and we are not convinced. So others will be convinced by us, and they are not convinced.
Language is remoteness, not getting closer
Speakers negate/exile themselves
Emerging from exile is emerging from language.
Language is the sounds of dead people.
Thus we lay a pavement of corpses
Living speech was the speech of the first human. At first, before he spoke.
(17-18)

Emerging from the exile of language, however, entails rising completely above the primary cause of alienation via total detachment from or mortification of all desire. Desire is the very impulse to be in another state, to have that which one does not possess, to reach for what one lacks or falls short of. Desire for a better life drives people from where they were, into loss of all they leave behind, into exile. Consequently, a nihilistic Sufi stillness and disciplined silence is prescribed to forestall the exilic movement of desire. But to be rid of desire and to remain in existence is paradoxical:

Desires which take us out of our houses grant us neither shade nor a picnic.
Desires drive us to flight on the byways, and they leave some of our bones in
unknown places.

Am I saying 'Don't desire'? How can that be? Isn't that like saying 'Don't be'?

But is Being by way of desire? Or is Being born furtively in [desire's] absence?

Does Being abide in desire or does it begin from the point which is after it, from
the empty space, and extend into a huge void?

To truly be—is to work to fill oneself with being, or to empty it out of you?!

And the goal—do you attain it if you work for it or if you nullify it?

Haven't you arrived when you nullify goals?

If you reach a desire, it gives birth to new desires. For desire attained becomes
manifold. It bears quarrelsome children, so you run, run and you don't attain
them until you breathe your last.

Sit down

Don't gasp for breath on the byways,

Nullify the way—you'll arrive. (21 ff.)

These philosophical grappings are related to the mystical paradoxes of Sufi writings, with al-Niffarī's *Mawāqif* (Stations)¹² as a prime example with his play of opposites. Sa'adah's quest for being free from the entanglements of place, language and desire is self-canceling, however, for it is itself a desire and consequently loss. Only non-being is free from loss. While Sufi mystical thought posits redemption through self-obliteration in the divine, and Nietzschean thought offers existential confirmation through willful self-assertion, Sa'adah's thought has only oblivion.

In a section specifically entitled "Exile," Sa'adah indicates how the poetic persona's existential experience of exile is in fact basic, the experience of every individual in his own isolation as an individual being. But more profoundly,

¹² al-Niffarī, *Kitāb al-Mawāqif wa-Kitāb al-Mukhāṭabāt* (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 1985).

it is the experience of being alienated from oneself as well. An exile which may have begun as locational, linguistic, and socio-cultural, is now psychological, spiritual, and universal alienation.¹³

Exile

Man is a reasoning being? Insufficient adjective. No longer precise.

Man is a being, exiled.

It has become difficult to pinpoint a native place for people-

Exile has expanded. The whole earth has become a place of exile.

There no longer is a native land—this is a designation that came out of cultural legacy, out of transitory memory. The human race resides in exile, not in a native land.

In the past there was communal exile and individual exile. Today the whole has become comprehensive in its banishment. The one exiled abroad, the one exiled within, the one exiled en masse, and the one exiled in self-essence.

There remains no indication abroad that this place or that is ours.

Nor is there indication within that our self-essence is peculiar to us.

It has become difficult—impossible, rather—for a man to define himself, so how can he pinpoint his place?

When self-essence itself is exiled, how can one talk about place?

[...]

It isn't yet possible to be present with others, neither among them nor in them. You no longer have words for them; they no longer have words for you. When you talk, you only talk with your essential self, even were you to think they were listening. When they talk, you hear only your voice, even were they to believe that you were listening. You are only in yourself, even if you were in a throng. And they are not with you, even if you were among them. You are nothing but an exile, and they are nothing but exiles.

An exile in place, and an exile in people. An exile abroad and an exile within. Exile's triangle: the Exile of Place, the Exile of Other and the Exile of Self-essence.

Has your self-essence found a native land for you? Say: Is your self-essence a dwelling place? Is there a language between the two of you? Are you two mutually understanding? Intimate? Do you sleep on one bed? Do you keep each other company on the road?

[...]

Everything has changed. Life and humankind and things have inverted on their connotations and themselves. They've entered into a chaotic mix toward nullification. Nullification of place, nullification of time, nullification of the other and nullification of self-essence.

Everything has entered into total exile. Everything has entered into absence.

¹³ Sa'adah, *Ghubār*, pp. 39 ff.

And this absence would be beautiful if it weren't a collective wash-out, if it weren't a concession to the mob. It would be beautiful, if the absent one had the privacy of his absence, and the one nullifying his individuality had the option to nullify.

For optional absence has victory over presence. Private exile has victory over belonging. Absence and exile have victory over the group, over being taken in comprehensively, and over being absorbed.

Thus exile is a rare victory; the exiled person wins his self-essence, even if he has no companions but the transient, even if he has no companions but the dead.

Thus the individual has presence

Thus the individual has no presence but his absence. (39 ff.)

The alienation and isolation of an individual is the only semblance of presence available in the exile of existence. Exile, which may have originally applied to the physical exile of place, a dislocation from home, has come to have much broader existential significance, applicable to all human experience. In the remainder of *Dust*, Sa'adah attempts to deal with various aspects of memory, which renews and reaffirms the painful experience of exile. In the chapter on "Forgetting" (51-60), Sa'adah suggests that the one avenue open for possible happiness is by way of forgetfulness, even to the point of positing a new rendition of Descartes' existential formula: "I forget therefore I am." The oblivion of forgetfulness allows one to overcome desire, history, family ties, and seeking to arrive at something. Indeed, the oblivion of forgetfulness may be the solution to obliterating exile:

Memory of Place

Well! Are you here, while you remember there?

The place you came from has passed; the one you're going to has not yet come. Place is only here.

But you are going along. And what is here becomes there.

A way with no place, then. Place, then—is forgetting places

If you by chance forget place, are you still in an exile? (55)

This section on forgetting culminates with a corollary to Sa'adah's neo-Cartesian declaration: "Forgetting is existing."

Sa'adah himself confirms the relationship of his discourse with the work of Nietzsche in the penultimate chapter of *Dust*, in which he again foreshadows his own sworn silence subsequent to this last published volume. Sa'adah points out his literary exemplars, those who preceded him into silence:

Silence

Why did Nietzsche pass his last years silently secluded? Did he want to say that silence is the highest stage of speech? The most eloquent expression of the futility of conversing? To refute the ability of interconnection between the essential self

and the other? Between individual and group? Was his silence despairing of language itself, of its connotations, its denotations, its contradictions, and its betrayals, of its source and its outlets altogether? Or the fact that silence is the sole permitted celebration of life, and the appropriate last honors for whoever wants to bid it farewell faithfully?

Why was Nietzsche silent all those years? And why did Rimbaud part with words? And the many others than the two of them—why did they put this dreadful boundary between language and its muteness? Between the essential self and the other, between life and its un-being, between abiding and erasing existence, this little lone being between two non-beings...?

[...]

So let's be silent a bit. Our sounds brought us here, to this Gehenna. To the slain felled by words, by discourses, and by slogans. To the tortured in locked cells of speech. The ones hanged by the impossibility of sound arriving, the ones flung down in confused vacuums where there is no ceiling of silence, and no vast space of speech.

The silent ones are also suicides... (51)

In this fashion, Sa'adah links together his themes of escaping exile, escaping language, escaping place and displacement, with the culminating mention of suicide. Having processed so many levels of the emotional, spiritual, philosophical and existential aspects of loss and memory in these and earlier works, he ends *Dust* with a chapter on "Suicides," perhaps writing it in order to emulate literary suicide. Sa'adah's poetic persona in *Text of Absence* had declared his despair of finding life or anything worthwhile in writing itself. "I, the writer, confess: I searched for life at length in writing, and didn't find it. I found no life, nor time, nor place, nor freedom. Freedom? A priori there is no freedom. How can there be freedom as long as there is no life?"¹⁴ Here, however, the poetic voice affirms with the nihilists the freedom of suicide. Here is Sa'adah's major difference and consonance with Nietzsche's ideas of supremacy and transcendence:

But dominion is not the quest of suicides. Obliteration is their quest. The obliteration of the dominion of life, and the dominion of death. The dominion of whoever brought them, and the one who will take them away. The dominion of the Other, and the dominion of the essential self.

Obliteration, which is dominion over existence, is an act of freedom... (72-3)

So that moment of freedom, the moment of obliteration is also the experience of the momentary beauty of life.

* * *

¹⁴ Sa'adah, *Naṣṣ al-ghiyāb*, p. 21.

While we can only speculate concerning the experiences of death, suicide and loss which Sa'adah has witnessed,¹⁵ his work invites us to measure both personal and collective tragedies with his comprehensive work, as we face the daily horrors of what we do to each other in the name of so many words. For many readers, Sa'adah's works speak to them personally, in part because of the horrors they have witnessed and continue to witness, in the Arabic speaking world and beyond. Sa'adah's work explores the philosophical, ethical and psychological dimensions of the experience of existential alienation, loss and displacement. It is no exaggeration to say that he is a world poet for this age.

Wadī Sa'adah's publications are truly remarkable monumental works of postmodern nihilism, emerging from his experience and articulation of exile and alienation in his own life, purified and distilled to have universal implications. Sa'adah's texts may be examined through the critical lenses built from the work of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Lacan, though Sa'adah declares that he has not read their works. Moreover, Sa'adah's oeuvre can be fruitfully compared with Gibran's corpus, for the large structural similarities in their lives as self-chosen exiles, while acknowledging the major differences in the tones of their aphoristic writings. Moreover, comparing the oppositional wordplay in Sa'adah with al-Niffarī and other Sufi writers will clarify to what extent Sa'adah has borrowed from the terminology of Sufi disciplines and spiritual orders to articulate his nihilist message. Finally, one can only hope that this remarkable poet, a humble latter-day Arabic Nietzsche, this nihilistic literary reincarnation of Gibran, this dark angel of existential exile, will fail in any attempt at literary suicide, and will grace us with his sad songs, or new songs of triumph, and hope renewed in some kind of literary transcendence over the pain of existential exile, which he has so thoroughly described, explored and mapped for us all.

¹⁵ Upon hearing my presentation on this material at Georgetown University in November 2004, a member of the audience kindly reminded me of the dreadful impact of the suicide of the gentle Lebanese poet, Khalil Ḥawī, in June, 1982 in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Indeed, one may wonder if Sa'adah's volume *Attempt to Connect Two Shores with Sound* is in some way a reference to Ḥawī's best known poem, "al-Jisr" ("The Bridge").

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