

“LITERATURE HAS VANISHED IN THE GLOBAL WORLD” INTERVIEW WITH IHAB HASSAN¹

IÑIGO BARBANCHO GALDÓS

Universidad de Navarra
ibarbanc@yahoo.es

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Ihab Hassan is undoubtedly one of the most important theorists of the post-modern. The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard and the American architectural theorist Charles Jencks, among others, have recognized their debt to him. Born in Cairo in 1926, he moved to the United States after his graduation in electrical engineering. “But I don’t like engineering”, he declares, “I love literature”; so he studied English literature and earned his Ph.D. in 1953. He has taught in two universities—in Wesleyan University from 1954 to 1970 and in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee since 1970—and has written fifteen books and thousands of articles. His most important contributions to post-modern theory are perhaps: *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971), *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (1975), *The Right Promethean Fire: Imagination, Science, and Cultural Change* (1980) or *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (1987). But he is not interested in postmodernism anymore. He moved in 1986 to autobiography (*Out of Egypt: Fragments of an Autobiography*), and in recent times he has progressively approached fiction. “I write only fiction now, I do not write essays anymore”.

You have recently written an essay—in fact, your last essay—entitled “Of Changelings: Academic and Otherwise”. A very appealing topic...

I am very interested in the idea of the changeling. It is a word in English that means “a child who has been secretly substituted for the parents’ real child”. Most people now around the world are interested in the question of identity—who I am—and they define themselves in relation to a very specific culture, or language, or group. I am interested in the person who crosses over from one identity to another, from one language to another, from one nation to another, because that is my experience: I was born in Egypt, but I have spent most of my life in America. The “changeling” is a metaphor of that identity. Identity in English means “the same as”, but I ask myself “The same as what? What I am supposed to be the same as?” I like the idea of displacement, of changeling, uncertainty about who I am, not being defined by an outside group.

In 1986 you wrote a memoir entitled *Out of Egypt*. Would you say it is an academic autobiography?

No. Shirley Lim really was correct in saying that there are no rules to define academic autobiography. I doubt whether all academics take the same kind of approach to their own lives. We have maybe the same profession, we all teach, read books a lot, and probably write. But all the dentists have the same profession too... Besides, even though I spent most of my life being a professor, I think that it is not the most important thing in my life, other things have been more important to me, and so my profession as an academic is not the defining element.

Why an academic life? There are plenty of possible lives...

I began as an electrical engineer. And as an electrical engineer I was sent by the Egyptian government to study in America. When I came to America I decided two things: the first one was “I don’t want to be an engineer”, and the second one, “I don’t want to go back to Egypt, I want to stay in America”. I became an engineer because in Egypt being a person studying literature is not taken seriously. You have to be an engineer, or a scientist, or a doctor. As I had good grades in mathematics and sciences, I was chosen to come here. But I loved literature. Finally, I became an academic because I wanted to write poetry and fiction, but I found it easier to write and publish essays. I came to the academic profession by the back door, now I am going back again. I write only fiction now, I do not write essays anymore.

Your “style” is unusual in the academic world. You do not write typical articles or books. What do you think about the academic institution? And what do you think about the ways in which we write and think nowadays at the university?

Of course my academic career is very long and things have changed a great deal. But I do not like the style of writing that is associated now with the university. I think it is too abstract, too full of jargon. Everybody wants to be theoretical, so they use words in order to be impressive instead of being elegant, or exact, or poetic. Therefore, I am sorry to see that the style of writing in the university has become so abstract. It was influenced mostly, about twenty or thirty years ago, by structuralism and post-structuralism, so we say words like *discourse* when we mean *writing* or *speaking*. There is a whole list of words like that.

The painter Mark Rothko said that he was not interested in abstraction, because he was not interested in a work of art in which life does not palpitate. We can say that you are not interested in an essay in which life does not palpitate.

Very good. I agree.

But for a young academic it is not easy to escape from that “jargon” or “abstraction”...

I know exactly what you mean and I am sorry. I say “I am sorry” because you are beginning in this. You have to find approval from people older than you are in the profession, otherwise they will not accept you, they will not give you a job or promote you. Now I have finished with all this; the struggle is in front of you. Another thing that I do not like about the university other than the style is the conformity. Every profession has some degree of conformity. Remember the medieval guild in the 12th century. The apprentice of carpenter, for instance, had to produce a master work, which was a piece that would show that he had mastered the medium of wood and of carpentry, and then he was accepted in the guild. The same thing, perhaps more rigorous, happens in the university. But conformity is not good for somebody who thinks the way you do.

How important was autobiography in the books before *Out of Egypt?* Could autobiography find its place in a theoretical book, for example?

I wrote two books, *Paracriticism* and *The Right of Promethean Fire*, in which I tried to experiment with the style called *para-criticism*, which is not exactly criticism, it is outside of criticism. In this style I tried to do many things: I tried to tell stories, to have anecdotes and poetic passages, to cut off from different sources. So instead of having a completely logical and continuous discourse, where B follows from A, C from B, etc., it was like a mosaic. When I first did it, it was not approved, people said that it was not scientific or scholar-like, but after a while it became accepted. Then I found that I could not go on repeating the same thing. Now I am writing fiction, but a fiction that it is not completely traditional.

Why is your autobiographic style so fragmentary, quotational, intertextual? Why this insistence on the *fragment*—you speak about the “dismemberment of Orpheus” or the “scattered bones of Osiris”?

Because I think that you have to make a space between things, you have to create silence as well as discourse. I think that silence is very important.

Would you say that postmodernism is autobiographical, as you suggested in your essay “Beyond Postmodernism”?

You could say that in postmodernism the subjective element has come into the picture. In modernist architecture, for instance, you find geometrical, cold, rigorous elements; in post-modern architecture there is an element of play, of personal expression. So you could say that postmodernism accepts the subjective element, more than modernism does.

I am interested in a statement that you made in another interview: Postmodernism has mutated in a wider movement called *postmodernity*. What is *postmodernity*?

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I can define it in one word: globalization. It is how digital technology, how media have now become a global phenomenon, and you can find Madonna, for instance, in the Sudan. So when postmodernism, as an artistic or cultural phenomenon, becomes a geo-political phenomenon, then I use the word *postmodernity*. It is the global side of postmodernism.

Has post-modern literature mutated, too?

Literature has vanished, it has become a media event. What has become more common than literature is rock singing. Literature has a too specific and individualistic element in it, and it does not work in the global world. In the new world something like Michael Jackson is necessary. Once, my wife and I were in Pakistan and two children started to talk about Michael Jackson. They know about Michael Jackson and not about Hemingway, you see?

I perceive a shared topic in the novels of some contemporary writers. The main characters of the novels written by Auster, Ishiguro, Kundera or Sebald have lost their place in the world. We can say that they are “homeless” characters, displaced subjects. Why this coincidence? Has this theme something to do with postmodernity?

This theme of homelessness is one of the big, big themes of the late 20th century and the early 21st century. It is a result of this tremendous migration. It began after

the Second World War and the collapse of the colonial system. People are everywhere; I mean there are more Pakistanis in England than in any one city in Pakistan. The theme of homelessness is very important to so many writers, like Sebald, Rushdie, Ishiguro, Auster... but in Paul Auster the homelessness is personal, is inside, like in the work of Kafka.

Perhaps it is due to the fact that, as Dean Maccannell points out in his book *Empty Meeting Grounds*, the “homeless” are the soul of the post-modern world?

Yes, because the boundaries are no longer fixed, the walls are broken. The Berlin wall, which no longer exists, or the wall that we are now trying to build with Mexico... it is not going to work. The boundaries do not work any more. You can see this in your own generation. I used to have to go through the customs when I went from Spain to France and now you do not have to do that...

This “lost” characters make me think about the romantic characters. What are the links between Romanticism and Postmodernism?

This is a very difficult question: the differences and similarities between Romanticism and postmodernism. But I can simplify. When a romantic talks about homelessness, he goes like this [*he brings his hands to his head in a pathetic gesture*]. When a post-modern talks about homelessness he says: “So, what? I am homeless, this is good”. There is a tragic, heroic element in Romanticism, but for a post-modern homelessness is not a bad condition. It is a way of life. Postmodernism is not nostalgic, it has no nostalgia for origins, for rules, for something lost.

In one of your latest works about postmodernism you use a very “anti-post-modern” vocabulary: you speak about *truth, realism, spirit*. What is “*beyond postmodernism*”?

I became tired of postmodernism. I worked with it for a long time and I was repeating myself and, more important, the writers are repeating themselves. When you are young and you go and discover postmodernism this is exciting, isn't it? But if you live with postmodernism, post-modern theory and post-modern texts for twenty years, you want to do something else. This is one point. The second point is that postmodernism became too easy for people, it became a formal play, but at a low level, so it became what we call frivolous. You see a post-modern work and think, “OK, it is post-modern, so what?” But the most important thing is that I was not ready to give up completely on the notion of truth. I think truth is very complicated, but I think it is important to have an idea of it, and to make a

distinction between lying and truth. I think that it is important to have a notion of *integrity* or a notion of *trust*. An American philosopher called William James became important for me because he was the father of pragmatism in America. He was not like Kant or Hegel, he did not speak about Truth with capital T, but he thought that it was important for people to trust one another and create truth together, not from outside. So this is the direction that I want to take after postmodernism.

In your autobiography you recall a dream in which God and his Viceroy fetch you “through mountains and valleys, through rivers, caves and chasms”, to a “misty, craggy place by a white sea”, and you add that when you woke up you felt... an immense compassion. There is something strange about this passage. Why compassion? Could you tell me something else about that?

No, when you wake up after a dream you do not always remember the exact things that happen in it. What you remember is the feeling of the dream: you remember that the dream was sad, or happy, or terrifying, but you are not quite sure why. The only thing that stayed with me was this feeling of compassion. If you want to ask about my feeling after intellectualizing it, I would say that it was a feeling of being one with all of creation, of being the same as everything. It is like Buddhism.

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Notes

¹. This interview took place at the University of Navarra on March 26, 2009 in the context of a Conference entitled «Academic Autobiography, Intellectual History and Cultural Memory in the 20th Century» (http://www.unav.es/leng_modernas/acadauto biography).

Received: 7 April 2009

Reviews

