

## *Living in Arabic*

EDWARD W. SAID

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THE WORD *eloquence* is not much in use today. What I have in mind is the sense that it once conveyed of distinguished verbal (both written and spoken, but mainly the latter) practice, a skill with words that may be partly due to an innate gift but that also needs to be developed and schooled in ways that will mark an eloquent person as possessing something that others do not. Oratory comes to mind immediately, as does having a good memory. The unforgettably illuminating study of the art of memory by the late Frances Yates shows the connection, but shows also how much that kind of skill has more or less disappeared, or at least isn't taught as such any more. I've often wondered whether there was some implicit link in my own mind between my fascination with eloquence and the fact that Giambattista Vico, the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher, has been such an important figure for me and that he was a Professor of Rhetoric with a specialty in eloquence at the University of Naples.

When today one reads the almost comically antiquated work of Vico that came out before the first version of *The New Science* in 1725, it is noticeable that most of it is taken up with the philological and historical study of how ancient authors used language formally in ways that could be detailed and subjected to minute scrutiny. For generations, the humanistic study of language required a knowledge of rhetoric and all sorts of figures of speech that were taught as recently as three or four decades ago in college and even high-school composition courses, as well as in curricula that sought to teach young men and women how to read and appreciate literature according to the tropes, figures of speech, and rhetorical devices that had very specific names and uses. These originated in speeches of the kind that Vico himself gave, studied, and of which he wrote imitations. There is no doubt that display and virtuosity are part of eloquence, although most classical rhetoricians, including Vico, warn against pompous or frivolous dis-

play for its own sake, designed to awe the listener with verbal cleverness or sheer mastery of rhetorical technique. This isn't quite the same thing as real eloquence, about which Vico has this to say in his *Autobiography*:

In the teaching of his subject Vico was always most interested in the progress of the young men, and to open their eyes and prevent them from being deceived by false doctors, he was willing to incur the hostility of pedants. He never discussed matters pertaining to eloquence apart from wisdom, but would say that eloquence is nothing but wisdom speaking; that his chair [of rhetoric and eloquence] was the one that should give direction to minds and make them universal; that others were concerned with the various parts of knowledge, but his should teach it as an integral whole in which each part accords with every other and gets its meaning from the whole. No matter what the subject, he showed in his lectures how by eloquence it was animated as it were by a single spirit drawing life from all the sciences that had any bearing upon it.

This highly organic view of what eloquence is anticipates Romantic interest in poetic form, evident in much of Coleridge's writing on the role of the Imagination as well as in similar concerns among his German contemporaries such as the Schlegel brothers. Vico's interest, however, is, in its own peculiar way, highly antiquarian, or rather antiquarian and contemporary at the same time. It was enabled, I suggest, because his students were all assumed to have a working knowledge of an older nondemotic language, namely Latin. Perhaps one reason we have lost the capacity for appreciating that now seemingly old-fashioned eloquence is that Latin is no longer taught or assumed to have been learned as a prerequisite for a well-rounded university education. No one today therefore even tries to emulate the orotund, Latinate manner of Dr. Johnson or Burke, except perhaps as a comic affectation. This is probably why there is such an emphasis instead on communication, immediacy of persuasion, and the ability to "sell" ideas, and why the often stilted and grandiose manner of certain con-

temporary Southern orators, like Barbara Jordan or Billy Graham, seems overdone and out of place, as if it were designed to do something verbally without adequate background or audience. The existence of a somewhat distant model, as well as one that is difficult to get access to without a considerable discipline of attention and rule learning, illuminates the considerably ornate and elaborate verbal performances that Vico and his contemporaries considered eloquent.

To a modern educated Arab anywhere in the Arab world, eloquence is much closer to what Vico experienced and talked about than it is for English-speakers. Rhetoric and eloquence in the Arab literary tradition go back a millennium, to Abbasid writers like al-Jahiz and Al-Jurjani, who devised incredibly complex schemes for understanding rhetoric, eloquence, and tropes that seem startlingly modern. All their work is based on classical written (as opposed to demotic spoken) Arabic, which is rooted in the Koran, the origin and model for everything linguistic that comes after it, as of course a great deal did. The distinction between classical written and demotic spoken Arabic needs some explanation, and is, I think, quite unfamiliar to users of modern European languages for whom there is a rough correspondence between spoken and literary versions, and for whom scripture has lost nearly all of its verbal authority.

All Arabs have a spoken colloquial that varies considerably between one region or country and another. The written language is quite different, however, and I will return to it in a moment. I grew up in a family whose spoken language was an amalgam of what was commonly spoken in Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria. There were small variations of dialect among those three regions (enough for one resident of the *mashriq*, as the Eastern Mediterranean Arab lands are known, to identify another resident as coming either from, say, Beirut or Jerusalem), but never enough to prevent easy and direct communication. But because I went to school in Cairo and spent most of my early youth there, I also was fluent in that colloquial, a much faster, clipped, and more elegant dialect than any of the others that I knew from my parents and relatives. Spoken Egyptian was made more widespread by the fact that nearly all Arabic films, radio dramas, and, later, TV serials

were made principally in Egypt, and thus their spoken idioms became familiar to and were learned by Arabs everywhere else; I remember very clearly that young people my age in Lebanon or Palestine could sing the ditties and mimic the patter of Egyptian comedians with considerable panache, even though of course they never sounded quite as fast and as funny as the originals.

During the 1970s and 1980s, as part of the oil boom of those years, TV dramas were made in other places as well, and they went in for spoken classical Arabic drama, which rarely caught on. For not only were these heavy costume dramas of the kind meant to be elevated and suitable for programmatically Muslim (and old-fashioned, usually more puritanical Christian) Arab tastes that might have been put off by the racy Cairo films, but they were also designed to be beneficial in ways that, to me at least, seemed hopelessly unattractive. For the inveterate channel surfer of today, even the most hastily put together Egyptian *mousalsal* (or serial) is infinitely more fun to watch than the best of the best-regulated classical-language dramas. However, only Egyptian dialect has this kind of currency. Thus, if I were to try to understand an Algerian speaking in *that* dialect to me, I would get more or less nowhere, so different and widely varied are the colloquials from each other once one gets away from the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean. The same would be true for me with an Iraqi, Moroccan, or even a deep Gulf dialect. And yet, paradoxically, all Arabic news broadcasts, discussion programs, as well as documentaries, to say nothing of meetings, seminars, and oratorical occasions from mosque sermons to nationalist rallies, as well as daily encounters between citizens with hugely varying spoken languages, are conducted in the modified and modernized version of the classical language, or an approximation of it that can be understood all across the Arab world, from the Gulf to Morocco.

The reason is that classical Arabic, like Latin for the European colloquial languages until a century ago, has maintained a living presence as the common language of literary expression, and has done so despite the lively and readily available resources of a whole host of spoken dialects, which, except in the Egyptian case I mentioned above,

have never attained wider currency than as a local means of communication. Moreover, these spoken dialects don't at all have the large literature in the classical lingua franca, despite the fact that in every Arab country there seems to be a substantial body of colloquial poetry, for instance, which is liked and often recited if only to other speakers of that colloquial.

Thus even writers who are considered regional tend to use the modern classical language most of the time and only occasionally resort to colloquial Arabic to render not much more than snippets of dialogue. So, in effect, an educated person has two quite distinct linguistic personae in the mother tongue. It's a common enough thing to be chatting with a newspaper or television reporter in the colloquial and then, when the recording is switched on, to modulate without transition into a streamlined version of the classical language, which is inherently more formal and polite. Thus "what do you want?" in Lebanese or Palestinian is *shoo bidak?* when addressed informally to another person, while in classical it would be *matha to reed?*

Not that there is no connection at all between the two idioms. There is of course some connection—letters are often the same, word order is roughly equivalent, and personal accents can be conveyed in the same tone. But words and pronunciation are quite different in the sense that classical or educated Arabic, as a standard version of the language, loses every trace of the regional or local dialect and emerges as a sonorous, carefully modulated, heightened, and extraordinarily inflected instrument capable of great, often (but not always) formulaic eloquence. Properly used, it is unmatched for precision of expression and for the amazing way in which individual letters within a word (but especially at endings) are varied to say quite distinct and different things. It is also a language whose centrality to a whole culture is quite unique, in that, as Jaroslav Stetkevych, author of the best modern book on the language, has put it,

Venus-like, it was born in a perfect state of beauty, and it has preserved that beauty in spite of all the hazards of history and all the corrosive forces of time. . . . To the Western student. . . Arabic



suggests an idea of almost mathematical abstraction. The perfect system of the three radical consonants, the derived verb forms with their basic meanings, the precise formation of the verbal noun, of the participles — everything is clarity, logic, system, and abstraction. The language is like a mathematical formula.

It is, besides, a beautiful object to look at in its written form; hence the enduring centrality of calligraphy in Arabic, which is a combinatorial art of the highest complexity, ever closer to ornament and arabesque than to discursive explication.

And yet, I have known only one person — only one — who actually spoke classical Arabic all the time, a Palestinian political scientist and politician who used to be described by children as “the man who speaks like a book” or, on another occasion, “the man who sounds like Shakespeare,” that designation signaling, to Arabs not fluent in English, the pinnacle of classical English, which of course Shakespeare was not, given the presence of so many clowns, peasants, sailors, and jokers in his plays. Milton is a better example of the weightily sonorous classical language. Friends of this Palestinian academic used to ask him whether he made love in the classical language (which has always seemed an impossibility, since the spoken dialect is invariably the language of intimacy), but he afforded them no more than an enigmatic smile by way of response. Somehow there is an implicit pact that governs which Arabic is to be used, on which occasions, for how long, and so forth. During the early days of the war in Afghanistan, I watched the controversial Al-Jazeera Arabic-language satellite channel for discussion and news reporting unavailable in the U.S. media. What I found striking, quite apart from what was actually said, was the high level of eloquence among the more embattled and even repellent of the participants, Usama Bin Laden included. He is (or was) a soft-spoken, fluent speaker who neither hesitates nor makes the slightest linguistic slip, surely a factor in his apparent influence; but so too, on a lower level, are non-Arabs like Burhaneddine Rabbani and Gulbuddine Hekmetyar, who clearly know no colloquial Arabic but who pedal forward with remarkable ease in the classical (koranic-based) tongue.

This is not to say that what has come to be called modern standard (i.e., modern classical) Arabic is exactly the same as that of the Koran's, fourteen centuries ago. It isn't the same, and although the Koran remains a much studied text, its language (as in the example of the classical speaker I gave above) is an antique, even stilted, and, for daily life, unusable one. Compared to the modern prose used everywhere today, it resembles a very "high" sounding prose-poetry. The modern classical is largely the result of a fascinating internal modernization of the language that began during the last decades of the nineteenth century—the period of the *Nahda*, or renaissance. This modernization was carried out mainly by a group of men in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt (a striking number of them Christian), who set themselves the collective task of bringing Arabic as a language into the modern world by modifying and somewhat simplifying its syntax, through the process of Arabizing (*isti'rab*) the seventh-century original. That meant introducing such words as "train" and "company" and "democracy" and "socialism" that couldn't have existed during the classical period. It also meant excavating the language's immense resources through the technical grammatical process of *al-qiyas*, or analogy. This is a subject brilliantly discussed by Stetkevych, who demonstrates in minute detail how Arabic's grammatical laws of derivation were mobilized by the *Nahda* reformers to absorb new words and concepts into the system without in any way upsetting it. In a sense, these men forced on classical Arabic a whole new vocabulary, which is roughly sixty percent of today's classical standard language. The *Nahda* brought freedom from the religious texts, and surreptitiously introduced new secularism into what Arabs said and wrote. Thus contemporary complaints by the facile Thomas Friedman in the *New York Times* and tired Orientalists like Bernard Lewis, who keep repeating the formula that Islam (and the Arabs) needs a reformation, have no substance. Their knowledge of the language is superficial, their use of it nonexistent. They show no acquaintance with actual Arabic usage, in which the traces of reformation in thought and practice are everywhere to be found.

Even some Arabs, who for various reasons left the Arab world relatively early in life and now work in the West, repeat the same nonsense, while in the same breath admitting that they have no serious knowledge of the classical language. An example is Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian woman and close friend of my sister in Cairo, who went to the same English schools that we attended, came from an educated, Arabic-speaking family, got her Ph.D. in English Literature from Cambridge, and wrote an interesting book on gender in Islam almost two decades ago. She has now reemerged as a campaigner against the classical language and, oddly enough, a Professor of Religion (Islam, in fact) at Harvard. In her memoir *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (1999), she waxes eloquent on the virtues of spoken Egyptian while admitting that she really doesn't know the *fus-ha* (classical Arabic) at all. This doesn't seem to have impeded her teaching of Islam at Harvard, even though it scarcely needs repeating that Arabic is Islam and Islam Arabic at some very profound level. Because of an extraordinary lack of quotidian experience or living in the language, it doesn't seem to occur to her that educated Arabs actually use *both* the demotic and the classical, and that this common practice neither prohibits naturalness and beauty of expression nor, in and of itself, automatically encourages a stilted and didactic tone, as she seems to think it does. The two languages are porous, and the fact that the user flows in and out of them is an essential aspect of what "living in Arabic" means. Reading Ahmed's lamentation makes one feel sorry that she never bothered to learn her own language, an easy enough thing for her to have done if she had an open mind and was so inclined.

For the first fifteen years of my life I lived exclusively in Arabic-speaking countries, although (like Leila Ahmed) I went only to English-speaking colonial schools, administered either by one or another church missionary group or by the secular British Council. Classical Arabic was taught in my schools, of course, but it remained of the order of a local equivalent of Latin, i.e., a dead and forbidding language (which is the sense that Leila Ahmed has of it). I learned to



speak Arabic and English at my mother's knee, simultaneously, and was always able to switch in and out of both, but my classical Arabic was soon outstripped by the much greater investment made in school by attention to English. During all of my early years the classical language for me was symbolic of parentally and institutionally enforced, not to say imprisoning, circumstances, where I would have to sit in church regaled by interminable sermons, or in all sorts of secular assemblies preached at by orators proclaiming a king's or a minister's or a doctor's or a student's virtue, and where, as a form of resistance to the occasion, I would tune out the droning and gradually come to gain a sort of dumb comprehension. In practice, I knew passages in Arabic from the hymnal, the Book of Common Prayer (including the Lord's Prayer), and such similar devotional material by heart, and even some (to me at the time) intolerably smarmy and usually patriotic odes in classical poetry. It was only years later that I realized that the atmosphere of rote learning, taught by lamentably ungifted and repressive teachers and clergymen, and a sort of "it's good for you" attitude, against which I was in perpetual rebellion, undermined the project altogether.

Arabic grammar is so sophisticated and logically appealing that it is perhaps best studied by an older pupil who can appreciate the niceties of its reasoning. As it is, ironically enough, the best Arabic teaching I know is done for non-Arabs at language institutes in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon, and Vermont. What I never really easily mastered, however, was what I referred to above: the ability to switch from one mode to another, colloquial to classical, informal to formal linguistically speaking. So alienated was I from the layers of repressive authority blanketing my person as a child and teenager that rebellion took the form of keeping to the language of the streets, reserving the respectable classical language solely for use as all-purpose mockery, savage imitations of tedious pomposity, and imprecations against church, state, and school.

Having already been in the U.S. (with frequent visits to home in Cairo and Lebanon) since 1951, and having only studied European languages and literatures during my entire sixteen-year school and

university career here, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war pushed me unwillingly into political engagement at a distance. The first thing that then struck me is that politics weren't conducted in the *'amiya*, or language of the general public, as colloquial Arabic is called, but more often in the rigorous and formal *fus-ha* (pronounced fuss-ha, the double esses and the h deriving from deep gutturals that have no European equivalent), or classical language. Recalling my childhood attitudes to the formal language, I soon felt that, as presented at rallies or meetings, political analyses were made to sound more profound than they were. Much of what was said in these rather too pedantic approximations of formal speech were based on models of eloquence that had been rote learned as emulations of seriousness, rather than the thing itself. This, I discovered to my chagrin, was especially the case with approximations to Marxist and liberation-movement jargon at the time, in which descriptions of class, material interests, capital, and social struggle—with all the trappings of contradiction, antithesis, and “wretched of the earth” that had been Fanon's legacy to us—were Arabized and turned to use in long monologues addressed not to the people but to other sophisticated militants. In private, popular leaders like Arafat and Nasser, with some of whom I had contact, used the colloquial, it seemed to me, to much greater effect than the Marxists (who were also better educated than either the Palestinian or the Egyptian leader). Nasser in particular did on occasion address his masses of followers in the Egyptian dialect mixed with resounding phrases from the *fus-ha*. And, since eloquence in Arabic has a great deal to do with dramatic delivery, Arafat usually emerges, in his rare public addresses, as a below-average orator, his mispronunciations, hesitations, and awkward circumlocutions seeming to an educated ear to be the equivalent of an elephant tramping aimlessly through a flower patch.

In a few years, I felt I had no alternative but to commit myself to a reeducation in Arabic philology and grammar. (Incidentally, the word for grammar is the plural *qawa'id*, whose singular form is the by now familiar *al-qua'ida*, also the word for a military base, as well as a rule, in the grammatical sense.) I was fortunate in having an old friend of my father's, Anis Frayha, a retired professor of Semitic Languages at the

American University of Beirut, as my tutor. He was, like me, an early riser. For almost a year between the morning hours of seven and ten, he took me on daily explorations through the language using not a textbook but hundreds of passages from the Koran (which, at bottom, is the foundation of Arabic usage), classical authors like Al-Ghazzali, Ibn Khaldun, and al-Mas'udi, and modern writers, from Ahmad Shawki to Mahfouz. An amazingly effective teacher, his tutorials disclosed the workings of the language in a way that suited my professional interests and philological training in Western comparative literature. Roughly at just that time, I was giving seminars here on speculations about language (I called it "the literature of language") by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors such as Vico, Rousseau, Herder, Wordsworth and Coleridge, Humboldt, Renan, Nietzsche, Freud, and de Saussure. Thanks to Frayha, I was introduced to, and later introduced into my own teaching and writing, Arab grammarians and linguistic speculators, including al-Khalil ibn Ahmad, Sebawayh, and Ibn Hazm, whose work antedated my European figures by seven centuries.

As illuminated and explained by Frayha, the passage between colloquial and classical Arabic was a riveting experience for me, especially as I made mental comparisons with vocabulary and grammar in French and English. In the first place, since Arabic is a minutely inflected language, one can learn the nine most commonly used formal derivations of a verb—the core of the language—from a three-consonant root, which syntactically makes available those commonly used forms (most Arabic sentences begin with a verb) from which the writer-speaker must choose, although over time this becomes automatic. Then, secondly, Arabic vocabulary is the richest part of the language, since words can be formed by a dizzyingly logical method from roots, and roots of roots more or less endlessly, and with what seems to be perfect regularity. There are of course variations in expression that have occurred over time, but archaisms and modern slang in the classical discourse do not present the same problems that they do in modern English or French, for example.

Classical Arabic—its rules, inflections, syntactical modes, and overpoweringly beautiful richness—seems to exist in a sort of abiding

simultaneity of existence quite unlike any other linguistic state that I know of. However, when colloquial conversations take a turn for the serious or complex, the speaker then resorts to it as a momentary or intermittent episode: the need for personal small talk like “pass the sugar” or “it’s time for me to go” returns one to the demotic. But, on the occasions when it is declaimed at a public gathering, like a business meeting or a seminar or an academic panel or a lecture, speakers are transformed into the bearers of this other language, in which even expressions like “I am happy to be here today” or “I don’t want to take too much of your time” can be rendered in classical formulas that function as an organic part of the whole discourse itself. Parenthetically, I should mention that the Al-Jazeera channel, which I can easily watch on my satellite dish receiver, not only conveys a far wider range of political opinions than any available in the mainstream U.S. media, but, because of the use of classical standard, shows none of the dreadful verbal tough-guy vulgarity that can disfigure our talk shows and panel discussions here, even when discussants hotly dispute major issues in politics and religion.

I have never escaped the amusingly dissonant jolt that comes with hearing a commonly used word that has totally incompatible meanings in the two languages. Take, for example, the name Sami. In English one immediately thinks of Sam Weller, or Sammy Glick, a comic, or at least an inelegant nickname or a shortened, familiar form of the much grander “Samuel,” which has a biblical resonance not quite appropriate to our time. In Arabic, Sami is also a common first name for a man (the feminine is *samia*, which with an added *al-* is also the word for “semitic”), but it derives from the word for “heaven,” *sama*, and therefore means “high” or “heavenly,” which is about as far from Sam or Sammy as one can get. They coexist in the bilingual ear, unresolved, never at peace.

Unlike English, spoken Arabic, either the standard or the local dialects, is full of polite formulas that comprise what is called *adab al lughah*, or proper behavior in the language. An individual who is not a close friend is always addressed in the plural, and questions like “what is your name?” are always asked indirectly and with honorifics. Like

Japanese and, to a lesser degree, French, German, Italian, and Spanish, Arabic users make all sorts of distinctions in tone and vocabulary as to how to address each other in given situations and on special subjects. The Koran is always referred to as *al-Koran al-kareem*, the honorable Koran, and after saying the Prophet Muhammad's name it is obligatory to say a phrase meaning, may God pray and deliver him; a slightly shorter version of the same phrase applies to Jesus, and in regular Arabic conversation God's name is invoked dozens of times in an extraordinarily varied arsenal of phrases that recall the Latin *deo volente*, or Spanish *ojala*, or English *in God's name*. When one is asked how one is feeling or doing, the immediate response is invariably *al-hamdulillah*, for example, and what can follow is a whole series of questions, also invoking God, that concern members of the family, none of whom is usually referred to by name but by position of love and prestige: a son, for instance, is not referred to by his name but as *al-mahrouss*, the one whom God preserves. I have an uncle who, when he worked as a bank executive, had a positive genius for going on and on with polite indirection for fifteen minutes of courtly woolgathering, unimaginable in English but learned early in life and concentrated for use in situations when there is more verbally to say than there is substance to treat. I always found it miraculously entertaining, particularly because I found it very hard to do myself, except for a moment or two.

One of my earliest memories of how much is expected of the classical Arabic speaker, or *khatib* (orator), in a formal situation comes from a story told to me many years ago by my mother and my great-aunt, a teacher of Arabic, after attending an academic speech in Cairo given by a well-known Egyptian personality, who might have been Taha Hussein or Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid. The occasion may have been political or it may have been commemorative, I have forgotten which, but I do remember them saying that there were a number of Azhar sheikhs in attendance. Punctuating the very solemn and elaborate speech, my mother had noted, one or another sheikh would stand up and say "allahoma," then sit down immediately, the one word expression explained to me as showing approval (or disapproval) for fineness



of expression (or a mistake in vocalization). The story itself illustrates the great significance attached to eloquence or, conversely, failures in it. It helps to know that the Azhar University in Cairo is not only the oldest institution of higher learning in the world, but that it is also considered to be the seat of orthodoxy for Islam, its Rector being for Sunni Egypt the highest religious authority in the country. More important is that the Azhar essentially, but not exclusively, teaches Islamic learning of which the core is the Koran, and all that goes with it in terms of methods of interpretation, jurisprudence, *hadith* (sayings of the Prophet) language, and grammar. Mastery of classical Arabic is thus clearly the very heart of Islamic teaching for Arabs and other Muslims at al-Azhar since the language of the Koran—which is considered to be the uncreated Word of God that “descended” (the Arabic word is *munzal*) in a series of revelations to Muhammad—is sacred, with rules and paradigms in it that are considered obligatory and binding on users although, paradoxically enough, they cannot by doctrinal fiat (*ijaz*) be directly imitative of it or, as in the case of *The Satanic Verses*, in any way challenge its entirely divine provenance.

Sixty years ago orators were listened to and commented on endlessly for the correctness and felicity of their language as much as for what they had to say in it. I myself have never witnessed such an occurrence as the story told to me, even though I recall with some embarrassment that when I gave my first speech in Arabic (in Cairo again) many years ago, and after years of speaking publicly in English and French but never in my own native language, a young relative of mine came up to me after I had finished to tell me how disappointed he was that I hadn't been more eloquent. But you understood what I said, I asked him plaintively, since being understood on some sensitive political and philosophical points was my main concern. Oh yes, of course, he replied dismissively, no problem: but you weren't rhetorical or eloquent enough. And that complaint still dogs me when I speak, since I am unwilling to transform myself into a classical *faseeh*, or eloquent orator. I mix colloquial and classical idioms pragmatically, with results (I was once amiably told) that resemble someone who owns a Rolls Royce but also likes to use a Volkswagen. I'm still trying to sort the

problem out because, as someone who works in several languages, I don't want to be accused of saying one thing in English that I don't say exactly the same way in Arabic.

I excuse my way of speaking by the plea that it avoids the circumlocution and ornamental preciosity endemic to the decline of contemporary political, journalistic, and critical writing in Arabic. These consist mostly of endless synonyms, or the use of "and" as a device for elaborating thoughts without regard for logic or development, or the use of an array of rote-learned formulae for indirection and euphemism of the kind that Orwell mocks in "Politics and the English Language," but which are to be found in every language. However, such a plea may also be an excuse I use to cover my sense of still loitering on the fringes of the language rather than standing confidently at its center. It's only in the last ten or fifteen years that I've discovered that the finest, leanest, most steely Arabic prose that I have either read or heard is produced by novelists (not critics) like Elias Khoury or Gamal al-Ghitany. Or by two of our greatest living poets, Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish, each of whom in his odes soars to such lofty rhapsodic heights as to drive huge audiences into frenzies of enthusiastic rapture, while at the same time their prose can become a razor-sharp Aristotelian instrument whose elegance resembles Empson's or Newman's. Their knowledge of the language is so virtuosic and natural that they can be both eloquent and clear by virtue of their gift for not needing fillers, or tiresome verbosity, or display for its own sake. But being a relative latecomer to the classical idiom—someone who did not learn it as part of a specifically Islamic training, or in the national Arab (as opposed to colonial) school system—I still have to think consciously about putting a classical sentence together correctly and clearly, with results not always elegant, to put it mildly.

Because Arabic and English are such different languages in the way they operate, and also because the ideal of eloquence in one language is not the same as in the other, a perfect bilingualism of the kind that I often dream about, and sometimes boldly think that I have almost achieved, is not really possible. There is a massive technical literature about bilingualism, but what I've seen of it simply cannot deal

with the aspect of actually living in, as opposed to knowing, two languages from two different worlds and two different linguistic families. This isn't to say that one can't be somehow brilliant, as the Polish native Conrad was in English, but the strangeness stays there forever. Besides, what does it mean to *be* perfectly, in a completely equal way, *bilingual*? Has anyone studied the ways in which each language creates barriers against other languages? So I often find myself noting aspects of the experience and gathering evidence from around me that reinforces both the tantalizing imperfection (for me) and the dynamic state of both languages, their perfect inequality, that is, which is so much more satisfying than a frozen, completed, but in the end only theoretical attainment. The attainment, say, that professional interpreters and translators seem to have, though they fail of it, in my opinion, since they cannot by definition be eloquent. Having left behind locales that have been ruined by war or that for other reasons no longer exist, and having very little by way of property and objects that come from my earlier life, I seem to have made of those two languages at play, as experiences, an environment that I can carry about within me, complete with timbre, pitch, and accent specific to the time, the place, and the person. I remember and still listen very fastidiously to what people say, how they say it, what words carry the stress and exactly how. This may explain why, in English poetry, it is Hopkins and Shakespeare's comic characters who have marked my ears so indelibly.

I think of my earliest years therefore in terms both of striking images that seem as vivid to me now as they did then, and of states of language in Arabic and English that always begin in the intimacy of family: my mother's strangely accented and musical English, acquired in mission schools and a cultivated Palestinian milieu early in the century, her wonderfully expressive Arabic, vacillating charmingly between the demotic of her native Nazareth and Beirut, and that of her long later residence in Cairo; my father's eccentric Anglo-American dialect, his much poorer Jerusalem and Cairo *mélange*, the sense he gave me both of admonishment and an often unsuccessful search for the right word in English as well as Arabic. And then more recently, my wife Mariam's Arabic, a language learned naturally in national

school without the disturbance of English and French at first, although both were acquired a little later, and hence her ease in moving back and forth between classical and colloquial, which I cannot ever have as she does or feel completely at home in as she is; or my son's amazing knowledge of the Arabic language as a magnificent somehow self-conscious structure, which he painstakingly got on his own at university and then through periods of residence in Cairo, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, noting down every new expression legal, koranic, poetical, dialectical that he learned until he, a New York City kid now a lawyer whose obvious first language is English, has in effect become a learned user of his great-grandfather's (Mariam's grandfather) "matter," the Arabic language that he taught as a university professor in Beirut before World War I; or my daughter's perfect ear as an accomplished actress and as a precociously early literary talent who, while she didn't do what her older brother did and go out and make herself master the strange quirks of our original *Muttersprache*, can nevertheless mime the sounds exactly right, and has been called on (especially now) to play parts in commercial films, TV serials, and plays, roles that are of the "generic" Middle Eastern woman, and which has slowly led her to an interest in learning the common family language for the first time in her young life.