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Paper presented at the Modern Language Association Annual Convention:
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Samir Grees (translated from Arabic by Hisham Ashkar)

Rashid al-Daif brings "the German back to his Reason" and Joachim Helfer directs to him "the fatal blow"

Two authors, a Lebanese and a German in an unbalanced "duel"

Al Hayat (London/Beirut) 2006 Nov 8

In the aftermath of 9/11 events, the German project "west-east diwan", which aimed for a dialogue between German authors and their colleagues in the Arab world, Iran and Turkey, saw the light. We get knowledge of the "diwan" after several Arab authors and their German colleagues exchanged visits, and seminars were held in Cairo, Beirut, Rabat, Berlin, Munich and Stuttgart. The project, till now, gathered well known names in the Arab world (Edouard al-Kharrat, Abbas Beydoun, Rachid al-Daif, Abdallah Zrika, Miral al-Tahawi ...) and less famous ones in Germany (Martin Mosebach, Michael Kleeberg, Joachim Helfer, Ulrike Draesner, Marica Bodrožić ...). And regardless some minor exceptions, we notice that all Arab participants are older -sometimes 30 years difference- than their German associates. Did the organizers find only young Germans enthusiastic enough for the project? And how can a literature dialogue be done in the absence of translated texts? On which subjects would the authors exchange their views? Answers to these questions, the Arab reader may find them in Rachid al-Daif's book "the return of the German to his reason" (Riyad el-Rayess, 2006) in which he tells about his experience in the "diwan" and his meeting with the young novelist Joachim Helfer (the homosexual).

Joachim Helfer had the opportunity to read "Dear Mr. Kawabata" in German, or "To Hell with Meryl Streep" in French, while Rachid al-Daif had to content with a chapter from one of the young German author's novels, translated into Arabic especially for the "diwan". And because the literature text was not the basis in the cultural exchange, nothing was left but interests in the person, his life, tendencies and basic instincts. That's what al-Daif wrote about in "the Return of the German to his Reason".

No doubt the book honestly tries to approach the homosexuality subject, which is still a taboo in our conservative Arab societies, and what is nice in the text is that al-Daif doesn't issue moral judgment, nor condemns, but tries to understand and to discover this totally strange world for an author whose society "celebrates masculinity and glorifies it". The Lebanese author keeps on questioning his capability in "reading" his associate, with his "alphabet" of which he knows it differs from the German's "alphabet". But what is annoying in "the Return of the German to his Reason" is the text's restrictedness, starting with the title, on Helfer's sexual tendencies, and then of the return of "reason" to him after having an intimate relationship with a female German journalist in Beirut. Although the "madness" came back to the German on his way back to Berlin, al-Daif saw in this Beirut experience "a turning point in the German author's life" and that's why he was enthusiastic to write about it. Al-Daif's text frankly discuss some widespread stereotype judgments on homosexuals in the Arab world, but, and throughout 90 pages, he didn't mention one word related to his colleague as an author and novelist, he never talked about literature or intellectual discussions they had. Joachim Helfer was reduced to "the homosexual" who had no other dimensions. It appears clearly in one of the book's scene, when al-Daif meets the Egyptian intellectual Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid in Berlin, and talks about the "diwan", and when Abu Zeid asks for the name of his associate, al-Daif answers in just two words: "homosexual author"!

The reader can't see in al-Daif's text as a frank attempt to accept Helfer as he is, but notices an overwhelming joy with "the Return of the German to his Reason", which pushes the Lebanese novelist to celebrate his colleague and prepares him a wedding dinner-party after he had met a woman. The book wasn't totally enlightening, but it was honest, and he didn't hide his prejudgment nor his society's stereotype images.

When Joachim Helfer read the translation of al-Daif's book, he decided to respond, well the book, first and last, is about his person; also sex is a main issue in both authors' writings. But the German novelist wasn't innocent at all in dealing with his Lebanese colleague's text. His intention was hypocrite, when he chose the form, in which the book was recently released to the German public under the title: "Homosexualisation of the World" by the famous Suhrkamp publishing house. Helfer didn't want to leave al-Daif's text as it is to reply on it, but divided it into paragraphs, and commented on each paragraph. He always had the final word. Was the German book -in this way- "the most serious contribution in the ethical conflict between east and west", as acknowledged the poet Joachim Sartorius in his annotation?

Starting from the first sentence, Helfer in his response uses a sarcastic tone nearly mocking his colleague, considering what al-Daif did was merely "to fulfill his task", since the project requires from participants to record their impressions and thoughts about the journey. Despite that: let us consider the book as a dialogue, or a debate, or even a duel. Among the basic rules that should be available is to give both sides an equal opportunity to talk, respond and comment. Joachim Helfer deprived al-Daif from this right. He took his text and cut it into pieces as he liked and then responded at it. Helfer's response was elaborated, usually longer than the original text, and the response mainly tended to generalize and to lecture the retardation of the "traditional" view on the "sexual identity". The German author started his conversation based on a unique reference, the European cultural reference, which Helfer believes is universal, while al-Daif's text was "open", and constantly questioning. Helfer answered in a definitive way. And his response is full of condemnations and generalizations. Rachid wrote with compassion and love, and Joachim ridiculed and taught. The book turns to an East-West conflict over homosexuality, and the attitude of "Arabs" and "Arabic culture" towards it. A subject is important, indeed, but requires a real dialogue, not lectures given with superiority from an author that doesn't leave the chance for others to respond. Helfer's text is full of contemplations and details worth to be read and discussed (unfortunately, the option of reading the book and discuss it, will not be available for the Arab reader, it's too much "daring" for our current culture to handle).

Another problem in Helfer's text is his tendency to confirm the image of the "retarded virile Arab", "the oppressor of homosexuals and women", the Arab who hates culture (the Lebanese author in Helfer's text is loathing museum visits as it makes him exhausted, as for listening to classical musical it bores him, and he only talks to his colleague about sex!) Helfer also confirms -consciously?- the image of "the anti-Semitic Arab". In one of "the return of the German to his reason" paragraph, al-Daif mentions visiting the Jewish Museum with Helfer, his colleague was hesitant, he didn't accept al-Daif's suggestion to have dinner together, then he accepted, but he went home immediately after dinner. Al-Daif explained what happened, he didn't pay attention to the fact that his colleague is in a "marital" relation which has its exigencies, and that he should have taken this issue into consideration, and the reason for his forgetting was, that an "intimate relation between two men, in my spontaneous education, should be in secret not in public" (page 60 al-Daif's book) to this paragraph, the German author replied in this way (page 145 and beyond, the German text) : truly he was disturbed that day, but the reason was al-Daif's behavior in the Jewish Museum which "thrives" from an "unbearable illiteracy". Why? Because al-Daif while he was standing in front of one of the paintings asked for the number of Jews killed during Nazi time, and when Helfer answered: 6 millions, al-Daif wondered, and asked his colleague about the number of Jews in Germany at that time. Helfer answered: around 600 thousands (in both Germany and Austria). Al-Daif found it odd to speak of 6 millions, especially that a large number of them immigrated to Israel. No doubt, that this issue particularly should be discussed thoroughly between a son of the "perpetrators generation" in Germany and one of the Arab authors who suffered Israel's wars on them. But instead of a mental argumentation, Helfer escaped to emotional images, and talked of his Jewish boyfriend and what he suffered from oppression - then he added: "if this is the historical, political consciousness (of Rachid al-Daif) it's better to talk with him, the rest of our meetings, about subjects that hurts no one , like sex!" like this, no discussion, no

arguing, but accusations and a “fatal blow” directed to the Arab author in the heart of Berlin which lies underneath the heavy weight of the historical guilt towards Jews.

The question suggesting itself when someone finishes reading “Homosexualisation of the World”: why the Lebanese author was content with this form? On this question, al-Daif answered, in Berlin, that he was surprised by the book being under publishing, so he accepted against his will, and the agreement was to publish the comments after the whole original text. Helfer didn’t commit to the agreement, so why al-Daif accepted? And does a German author accept the publishing of his book, translated in Arabic, and being commented in this manner? And does the book in his German version really serve the “dialogue between cultures”?

Abbas Beydoun (translated from Arabic by Hisham Ashkar)

Rashid's story

Rashid al Daif: my German friend

As Safir (Beirut) September 22, 2006

"The Return of the German to his Reason" is a title that reminds us of a classical erotic book; it contributes, as other Arabic books of this genre, to the erotic education. I guess that Rashid al Daif chose it with total awareness of the old title, and he chose it deliberately, and in a way to contradict the first title. Rashid's book is not about the erotic education, but it's aiming for something else and for revealing this, it's better to go back to his book.

As for the book, it's not only a novel nor a study, it's not totally a personal biography or non-biography, it's not only a mix of this and that, it's a narration less than a novel, and an approach less than a study, and a partial biography, and the winner from all that is, at least, literature. Literature could come from the weakest way as from its strongest, and Rashid's book is not a biography as much as it's a "commenting" biography.

He follows totally a secondary biography, it's a turning point in a biography, and we don't know who's the narrator, the subject or the self. Imagine a biography of what is not happening to you, and for what is not in your life, so it will be Rashid's novel. Rashid met a German homosexual novelist in a German program. And this alone was an experience. Homosexuality in Rashid's life is only an event just by this degree, it's neither his life nor his experience, but in a way it becomes, with his homosexual colleague, an experience. I don't know if it was an experience just with the "other", the "different". Meeting Joachim Helfer, awoke in Rashid what he thought never existed in him. It's a story with what he is not and never could be, it's his story with what is neither his story nor his life. It's a story we don't think it exists, because if it does, the life of a person and "himself" will diverge in many ways he knows nothing about, but it appears for him in the end that he's living a different life with a different self. I don't know if Rashid went so far, but he searched for his "homosexual" biography. It means that he searched for his thoughts and responses towards homosexuality, and found plenty of things, or just enough for what this book contains.

His homosexual German friend found, while he was in Lebanon, a German woman so he slept with her, and she had a girl from him; in this case, homosexuality shows a contradictory face, but it doesn't deny itself, it goes far beyond itself. As for Rashid, who felt betrayed, that his German friend took him to what he can't handle in his "not life" novel, he transferred his complaint to the title of the book "The Return of the German to his Reason". A nearly revengeful title, though all the novel was written with a mathematical curiosity, and a near-scientific spirit of discovery. I guess those kind of meetings don't lack of a certain conflict. And the title is an attestation that Rashid won over the German homosexual and put him back in his place.

Rashid and Joachim agreed on telling the story, each one from his point of view. But the German after reading the translation of Rashid's text, decided to comment on it and discuss it. Rashid's novel and Joachim's comments were to be published in one book by "Suhrkamp" a famous German publishing house, which took care of publishing it and taking it up in its catalogue.

When Rashid and I arrived to Berlin, one of his worries was to see the book; one day I met him, he had a gloomy face, he knew that Joachim cut his text to pieces and commented on it. His text became scattered, something an author, any author, would never want to happen to his work. It hurts deeply the narcissism of the author, and shows him his body as shrapnels in a broken mirror. Rashid asked for an advice from anyone he knows, once twice, even

more, no answer really convinced him, he had the option not to sign the contract, and to declare he has no relation with the book, but it's also a risk, and it's a "kind of disappearing", not less nightmarish than the "shrapneling". They, all, advised him to carry on with the book. Mohamad Arkoun told him, that the book in this way is imprisoned and easier for the reader, and that's "ok" as the book retains its unity in its original language; as for me, what happened is similar to a car accident, Rashid doesn't have a relation with it, and he has to accept the consequences. A lot was said, but no one advised Rashid not to sign. So he signed on everyone's responsibility, after he got a promise from the publishing house, to post the entire book on their website and the printed copy would mention that.

After signing the contract, he received parts of the Arabic translation of the German text, among them a paragraph where Joachim talks of the visit to the Jewish Museum. And all what Rashid had in mind is asking for the number of people exterminated during the holocaust, and when he knew it's six millions, al Daif wondered and asked for the number of German Jews. He was answered less than 600 000, Rashid was more astonished, how to get 6 millions out of 600 000, not forgetting all who went to Israel. Joachim left Rashid with his accounts, after he realized that it is all what Rashid's prepared to, and went in a hurry to his Jewish boyfriend to weep in his arms, he wouldn't discuss with Rashid in such an important issue and he preferred to talk with him in more easy and more "prepared to" matters, like sex. Then Joachim mentioned that Rashid took him to Khyam camp where he saw two memorials for two martyrs died under torture, he saw this and didn't find it as annihilation, but Rashid never asked him to show him memorials for the Jewish detainees and victims in Berlin.

It was a strange text, it inspires, from nothing, anti-Semitism, with a novel trick, Rashid's question concerning numbers becomes insensibility, more over, hatred. And if you compare Rashid's question to Joachim crying in his friend's arms, the difference will appear, not to mention the digression, from nothing too, that Rashid didn't ask him to take him to Jewish victims memorials while he took him to Khyam to show him similar memorials. From nothing, or from a novelistic distortion of totally neutral things (question of numbers) and rhetoric games (comparison between weeping and the number question, memorials of Khyam and not asking for similar memorials) it can be suggest that this Arab (Rashid al Daif) is surely Anti-Semitic, and he'll be also hostile towards homosexuality, this is what you expect from an Arab. It's a cliché of an Arab, as Michael Kleeberg said, and everyone will believe it. This time I didn't think of an "accident". There's clearly a conscious arrangement. We didn't know German, but now we can understand, that Joachim's comments are kind of boxing. He made the book his, through the cutting process, and chose to turn it into a battle, and to strike where the result is guaranteed. By the insinuation of Anti-Semitism, he just wanted an easy and sure win. In a country like Germany nobody will think a lot about this stamp. Once it's suggested, it will become true, especially for an Arab.

I felt personally that I'm concerned, and that Joachim's attitude is disparaging, and it can only be explained through the cliché of an Arab. I gave Rashid a hard time. That insinuation in the current German literature is very grave. For Michael (another German friend) it was grave too. But the worst is that what was written includes Jewish or German superiority constructed illusions, it had a lot of discrimination, superiority and prejudice. Rashid protested, he felt betrayed; he left Joachim to do whatever he wants. He hid behind German language to launch a war against Rashid. He made the book, as his, and gave himself the final word, and above all, this stamp. There's antipathy, aggression and forgery too.

I was standing in the hotel lobby, when Joachim came to meet Rashid, who was beside me, both of them continued discussing the subject. I couldn't hold myself, I intervened, I told Joachim that this is defamation, you are insinuating from nothing for a big case, like Anti-Semitism, Joachim said the German literature is not a literature of insinuation, the Arabic literature is a literature of insinuation.

I went mad, in his response there's only disparaging, the German literature was (in a weird point of view) a literature of truth, while insinuation, which is suggestion and maybe fabrication is reserved for Arabic literature. I told him what do you know about Arabic literature to say that, I read most of the greatest Germans authors works, and I don't allow myself to make such a trial. It's discrimination, it's a malicious intention, just to win over Rashid in a dirty way, Joachim was surprised, and I heard him saying before heading to a press conference with Rashid: I'm not racist.

Rashid defended himself abundantly during the press conference, and also during a mutual reading at the international literature fair, as for me I had to explain in a political seminar with my partner Michael Kleeberg that Israel, which is considered in the west as a modern and democratically state, is the state that destroys the only two democracies in the region (Lebanon and Palestine) and treats the democratic elected MPs as outlaws and kidnaps them in broad day light, and that it is the last remaining form of colonialism in the world, and discriminates one quarter of its population (the Arab Israelis). Lot of people discussed, but, amazingly, no one accused me of anti-Semitism.

Aus: Akhbar Aladab (Kairo) 14. Oktober 2006

Eine heftige Diskussion bei der Frankfurter Buchmesse

Der Deutsche, der zur Vernunft zurückkehrte

Aus Frankfurt von Gamal Al-Ghitani

Ein heftiger Disput im Internationalen Zentrum sorgte auf der Frankfurter Buchmesse für Wirbel. Die Hauptkontrahenten waren der libanesische Literat Rachid Daif und der deutsche Schriftsteller Joachim Helfer, der für seine Homosexualität bekannt ist. Beide beteiligten sich an dem Austauschprogramm des „West-Östlichen Diwans“. In diesem Programm besuchen sich jeweils zwei Literaten gegenseitig für sechs Wochen im Land des Gastgebers. Danach sollen sie jeweils einen Text über die gesammelten Erfahrungen schreiben.

Im Fall Rachid Daif/Joachim Helfer informierte Thomas Hartmann, der Leiter des Programms, Rachid Daif im Vorfeld darüber, dass Joachim Helfer homosexuell ist. Wahrscheinlich war dies der Ausgangspunkt für Rachids Niederschrift „Die Rückkehr des Deutschen zur Vernunft“. Ein schönes und humorvolles Buch, in dem Rachid seine Erfahrung mit Joachim Helfer niederschreibt. Doch der deutsche Schriftsteller ärgerte sich über den Text. Als das Buch ins Deutsche übersetzt und beim Verlag Suhrkamp erschienen war, war Rachid sehr überrascht darüber, dass Joachim keinen eigenständigen Text verfasst, sondern stattdessen sein Buch mit Kommentaren mitten im Text ergänzt hatte. Dies verärgerte wiederum Rachid und veranlasste ihn dazu, eine Erklärung zu veröffentlichen, in der er die Gründe seines Unmuts erläuterte.

Vor diesem Hintergrund fand die Veranstaltung statt, an der der arabische Autor Rachid Daif, der deutsche Autor Joachim Helfer, der Journalist und Politaktivist Thomas Hartmann, sowie die bekannte Schriftstellerin und Hochschuldozentin Dr. Shereen Abu Al-Naga und ich teilnahmen.

Für uns ist es von großem Interesse, wenn jemand seine Homosexualität offen äußert und darüber redet, denn auch in unseren Gesellschaften existieren Homosexuelle. Nur dass sie hier nicht offen dazu stehen, sondern eher versuchen, ihre Neigung zu vertuschen. In der arabischen Welt hat bis heute niemand den Mut gehabt, sich öffentlich zu seiner Homosexualität zu bekennen. Deshalb war es für mich interessant an dieser Veranstaltung teilzunehmen, insbesondere nachdem ich Rachids Buch und Joachims Kommentare gelesen habe.

Thomas Hartmann begann mit einer Vorstellung der Teilnehmer. Er erklärte die Situation der beiden Schriftsteller vor deren Teilnahme an dem Austauschprogramm des „West-Östlichen Diwans“. Dann sprach Rachid Daif und stellte klar, dass das auf Deutsch erschienene Buch keineswegs ein Dialog sei, denn er habe einen zusammenhängenden Text geschrieben, der durch die Kommentare von Joachim zerstückelt worden war. Er fügte hinzu, dass es vereinbart gewesen sei, dass jeder für sich einen eigenen Text schreibe, dass Joachim seinen Text gelesen hatte und mit der Veröffentlichung einverstanden gewesen sei.

Ich selbst bemerkte, dass ich Rachid Daifs Text mit dem Titel „Die Rückkehr des Deutschen zur Vernunft“ gelesen hatte, und ihn nicht als Kommentar zu Joachims Person verstehe, sondern als Text aus der Perspektive von Rachid betrachte. Er beschreibt den Aufenthalt Joachims in Beirut sowie seine Beziehung zu einer deutschen Journalistin dort und die Zeugung eines Kindes mit ihr. Die zweite Bemerkung betraf Rachids Ausspruch, dass das Bett der wahre Kriegsschauplatz zwischen arabischer Tradition und westlicher Moderne sei. Das sehe ich jedoch anders, denn der wahre Kampf findet auf realem Boden statt: es gibt Besatzungsarmeen, die arabisches Blut vergießen, Schätze werden geplündert. Auch wird für den Kulturkampf auf beiden Seiten mobilisiert, einen Kampf, der uns ins Mittelalter katapultieren wird. Einerseits sind da die Radikalen in unseren Ländern, die die Juden und Christen als

Heiden bezeichnen, andererseits gibt es einen Samuel Huntington und die Neokonservative. Und zu guter Letzt griff der Papst persönlich den Islam an.

In den Antworten Joachim Helfers fiel mir die Arroganz auf. Er urteilte über die Kultur Rachids und beschrieb den arabischen Mann als jemanden, der westliche Frauen als leichte Beute betrachtet. Dabei war jedoch Rachids Buch urteilsfrei, während Joachims Kommentare von Belehrungen durchzogen sind und den Anschein erwecken, dass er davon ausgeht, dass seine Kultur den Maßstab setzt.

Rachid sagte über seinen Text, dass dieser mit den herrschenden Meinungen ironisch umgehe und dass er Joachim weder kritisiere noch ihm feindlich gegenüber stehe, im Gegenteil: viele Leser solidarisierten sich mit Joachim, denn er habe ihn als Mensch dargestellt, der seine Freiheit ausübt und ihre Grenzen zu erweitern sucht. Er habe seine Geheimnisse nicht preisgegeben, doch Joachim hätte feindselig darauf reagiert. Er versuche einen Dialog zu führen, doch der Deutsche verstehe seine Botschaft nicht. Obendrein versuche Joachim seinen Text zu ersticken.

Joachim verteidigte sich mit dem Argument, Rachids Text sei in dem Buch vollständig enthalten, und seine Gegenrede sei nicht feindselig gewesen. Er habe sich erlaubt, den Text zu kommentieren, da das Buch schließlich sein Leben betreffe und weil viele falsche Meinungen über Homosexuelle herrschten. Er nannte als Beispiel die Verhaftung von Homosexuellen im Rahmen des Queen-Pot-Ereignisses in Ägypten und bemerkte, dass Deutschland diese Phase hinter sich habe.

Zur Erklärung erwiderte ich an dieser Stelle, dass die jungen Männer nicht wegen der Homosexualität vor Gericht gezogen wurden, sondern wegen Häresie. Erst die Presse machte daraus einen Wirbel und nannte es Perversität. Es gibt jedoch kein Gesetz in Ägypten, das die Homosexualität verbietet.

Dr. Shereen Abu Al-Naga bemerkte, dass schon der von Rachid gewählte Titel an sich die Gemüter erregen würde und betonte, dass der Roman sich auf andere Romane beziehe, wie z.B. den Roman „Zeit der Nordwanderung“ von Al-Taiyib Salih. Sie fügte hinzu, dass beide Schriftsteller mit Vorurteilen vorbelastet waren: Joachim beschränkte sich auf die Verteidigung. Er hätte seinen Text auf der Grundlage des Dualismus aufbauen können, doch sein Text war geschlossen und bewegte sich auf einem kleiner werdenden Zirkel; er konstatierte, dass die Europäer fortschrittlich und die Araber Ganoven seien. Dazu traktierte er den Leser mit der Frage: bist du für oder gegen Homosexualität? Er sprach vor allem den deutschen Leser an. Dass Joachim direkt in die Zeilen von Rachids Text schrieb und nicht einen separaten Textbeitrag, irritiert mich. Es stellt sich auch die Frage, warum Rachid das Verlegen des Buches in dieser Form akzeptierte?

Joachim wandte ein, dass Rachids Buch auf Arabisch erschienen ist und sich gut verkauft hat, und dass er (Joachim) mit einem Buch auf Arabisch hätte antworten sollen, was er natürlich nicht konnte. Was den Dialog betrifft, so ist eine Kluft sichtbar. Beim Lesen der Texte merken wir tatsächliche Unterschiede; Rachid hatte gute Absichten. Ich leugne es nicht, es gab deutliche Grenzlinien und keinen bloßen Austausch von Komplimenten. Wir haben diese Texte zur Aufklärung geschrieben und Aufklärung ist manchmal schmerzlich.

Joachim bekräftigte, dass Rachids Text vollständig vorliege und dass es keine Erzählung sei, wie Dr. Abu Al-Naga behauptete. Vielmehr beschreibe er sein Leben. Alle Protagonisten seien wirkliche Personen, deshalb sei dies keine Erzählung. Er fügte hinzu, dass beide Texte vor der jetzigen Debatte um den Papstvortrag geschrieben wurden.

Ich fragte Thomas Hartmann, warum er Rachid unbedingt von der homosexuellen Neigung Joachims erzählen wollte. War dies nicht richtunggebend für die folgenden Ereignisse, insbesondere für Rachid?

Thomas antwortete, dass Joachim Helfer seine Homosexualität nicht verheimlicht habe und dass es ihm darum ging, unerwünschte Reibungen zu vermeiden. Er wollte, dass Rachid eben dies wisse und dachte, es sei vielleicht besser so, weil er Araber ist. Dieser Dialog diene nicht nur der Aufdeckung von Unterschieden, sondern auch dem Zweck, die Kluft zwischen den beiden Seiten genauer zu bestimmen. Er bedankte sich bei beiden Schriftstellern für ihren Mut.

Darauf wiederum sagte Rachid, dass er nicht verstehe, was Thomas mit Mut meine. Dass er in Absprache mit Joachim geschrieben habe, ihm das Ergebnis vorgelegt habe und in beiderseitigem Einvernehmen den Text veröffentlichte. Das sei nicht mutig gewesen. Es seien reale Themen behandelt worden. Was Joachim tat, war einfach: er nahm sein Buch und kommentierte es. Er bezichtigte jeden Araber als Kulturfeind, als Antisemiten und als frauenfeindlich. Er wünschte sich, dass der Dialog von allen Seiten offen geführt würde, denn jeder offene Dialog beinhaltet Schwierigkeiten.

Die Veranstaltung war gut besucht. Am gleichen Abend lud der Suhrkampverlag anlässlich der Veröffentlichung des Buches zu einem Empfang ein, an dem –ungeachtet der Meinungsverschiedenheiten– beide Schriftsteller teilnahmen, um ihr Buch zu signieren.

Aus dem Arabischen von Youssef Hijazi

Ken Seigneurie¹

Chiasmus on Masculinity in Rashid al-Daif's How the German Came to His Senses

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I have a sitcom screenplay I want to pitch to a Hollywood producer but since I don't know any, you'll have to do. Here we go. There's this 50-something Arab heterosexual male born and raised in the mountains of Lebanon and living in Beirut, accepts to spend six weeks in gay Berlin where he must work cheek-by-jowl with a 30-something member of the sophisticated Berlin gay community. Lots of Arab-in-the West hijinks. What do you think? "No," you say, "What about the second season?" OK, the German, who is in this decades-long relationship with a man 37 years his senior, comes to Beirut for three weeks, and the intercultural antics continue but this time it's a German in the Arab world. How about that? "No," again. "You need a serious subtext for the third and following seasons." OK, this gay German I've been telling you about falls in love in Beirut with . . . a woman, impregnates her then and there – or thinks he does – and returns to Berlin. Can't get her out of his mind. They try again, miscarriage, then another try and at last the woman conceives and gives birth to a girl. All this time, the gay German is still living with the 70-something gay partner who happens to be Jewish into the bargain. Lived through all kinds of horrors, is very kind, can't be abandoned. The young German has a dilemma. Eventually resolves it by splitting his time between both households and everybody is happy in the pomo family. Will you buy it? What if you could bill it as a true story?

Here's how it happened. Under the auspices of the German "East-West Divan" program, the Lebanese novelist, Rashid al-Daif, went to Germany for six weeks in fall 2003 where he met and worked closely with a German writer, Joachim Helfer. Afterwards, Helfer returned the visit to Beirut in Spring 2004 for a further three weeks of joint lecturing and work in common. Each was encouraged to write about his experiences in the program as a way of concretizing the dialogue they had undertaken. Al-Daif, with Helfer's blessing, wrote a 90-page novelized biography of his German counterpart in Arabic, translated as *How the German Came Back to His Senses*. After Helfer approved the publication of al-Daif's book in Arabic, he wrote a response in German that was only slightly shorter. The German publisher, Suhrkamp, brought both texts out some three months ago in German within the covers of the same book. In this paper, I will not treat the controversy, not to say scandal, surrounding the publication of this book in German. Nor will I treat Helfer's response. Instead, I will concentrate on al-Daif's text in the effort to explore its contribution to dialogue between the Arab world and Germany, especially in the realm of gender and sexuality.

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Dialogue, according to al-Daif, means the exchange of viewpoints. Unlike debate, it does not seek to determine the stronger or weaker argument, nor, like negotiation, does it seek to achieve a consensus. It is simply an effort to articulate one's own point of view and to understand that of someone else. As such, dialogue is far more daunting since it does not depend on externally verifiable results – winners and losers or consensus and agreement. And the most difficult part is, of course, understanding the interlocutor's point of view. *How the German Came to His Senses* is an object lesson in overcoming the obstacles that lie in the path of genuine understanding. In this paper, I will identify this text's implicit rhetorical strategy for interiorizing an alien subject position without necessarily adopting it as one's own. Al-Daif does not make the job easy for himself. Most intercultural encounters take place over a common interest or point of identity that ensures a minimum of good will. Sure, both al-Daif and Helfer are writers but they swim in vastly different literary environments. And not only is one straight and the other gay; one is a product of the Arab world, the other of Europe; one is from a working class background, the other from the *haute bourgeoisie*; one is in his fifties, the other in his thirties. Et cetera. Moreover, al-Daif chose to write honestly about that very aspect of Helfer that he found most alienating: his homosexuality. He took advantage of Helfer's offer to use his real name as well as his own name in an effort to ensure that this short book would be received as a contribution to actual dialogue. Yet the result is a novelized biography since some episodes have been added and the account of the actual encounter has at times been modified.

It was a risky experiment from the start. For one thing, it would be difficult to overestimate the challenge of writing sympathetically about homosexuality in the Arab world. Indeed, can anybody think of a single modern Arab literary treatment of the topic that is not one-dimensional? Al-Daif, an Arab writing for an Arab audience, has written about it, neither derisively nor as one who seeks to ignore difference to achieve a false sense of unity, but as one who seeks to explore the possibility of genuine understanding among people who share little in common. He writes therefore from a frankly heterosexual Arab male standpoint with no bridge to the German gay community other than his desire to understand it. I look at it as something of an acid test for intercultural understanding.

Wittingly or no, al-Daif employs a method in his task. It consists of initially recognizing the depth of the split between Germany and the Arab world on the question of homosexuality. The narrator Rashid, who must be distinguished from the author Rashid al-Daif if one is to avoid an impoverishing reduction of the text's social relevance, notes that Germany has legally and socially accepted gay lifestyles for decades, whereas in the Arab world they remain illegal. He refuses, moreover, to fudge the issue by claiming that the Arab laws are outdated and ignored. Indeed, the narrator allies himself with popular attitudes: "For us, the homosexual act is disgraceful, shameful and must be suppressed. It's a crime punishable by law. Homosexuals are called perverts and their practices are considered sex acts against nature". He also refuses to deny his own homophobia, stressing that he sees it as a threat to the heterosexuality of young people and admitting that he worried constantly about his son's

sexual orientation while the latter lived in France, a country ostensibly more tolerant than Lebanon of homosexuality.

So part of Rashid's effort to understand the other consists of initially recognizing maximal alienation and admitting one's own role in its construction. Next, he goes so far as to exaggerate his anxiety, fretting over his first meeting with Joachim:

I must be cautious from the beginning, clear from the beginning, dissuasive from the beginning in such a way that boundaries are drawn from our very first meeting and that each of us stays within them! Because some gay men don't remain within their limits and don't hesitate to disturb others, especially when you consider that I'm a hairy man – even if I don't have a mustache to show for it. I say this in all candor and without a qualm.

True, he has admitted to being in thrall to stereotypes about homosexuality, but the anxiety displayed in this passage seems just a bit much. It marks the next stage in his rhetoric of understanding. The exaggerated anxiety is a way of defamiliarizing popular beliefs. If a little homophobia seems so natural, a bit more should be all right. And, indeed, there are readers who will say, "Yes, he's right! Homosexuals do overstep their limits!" just as others will claim, "The narrator is extremely homophobic!" For still others, however, this litmus test is beside the point. These readers will see the narrator set himself up as the butt of gentle irony as if he were saying, "Look, where our attitudes lead us!" By slightly exaggerating his convictions, Rashid exposes them as just potentially ridiculous. He demonstrates that they are not the positive pole of a reified binary but fall somewhere in a web of convictions that also contains paranoia. This does not mean that he can, or even desires to, extricate himself, only that his convictions are relative, not absolute values. Thus, having no sooner established in the opening pages of the book his distance from homosexuality, Rashid makes an oblique move to bridge the difference by exposing the contingency of his own views..

In another discursive context, the irony in this passage might seem caricatural, but following the narrator's admission of his homophobia and his assurance that he is speaking with candor, it is just plausible that he actually believes body hair drives gay men wild. Al-Daif never telegraphs his irony. Indeed, numerous readers of both the Arabic original and the German translation fail to see it as ironic. Such delicate equivocation between candor and self-irony is a hallmark of al-Daif's writing dating back to his war novels in which, for example, the narrator (again "Rashid") obstinately insists on understanding his torturers' point of view (*The Side of Innocence*) to such an extent that one half-wonders uneasily whether the narrator is not a masochist. Later in the text before us today, when Rashid admits to tugging his sleeves to conceal the hair on his wrists in front of Joachim as a woman would tug her skirt to avoid exciting unwanted interest, the effect is both downright campy and again just barely plausible but it would take an exceptionally literal-minded reader to detect no irony at all.

Following such an exaggeration, one might expect a repentant vision of homosexuality such as at the end of a sitcom when the scales fall from the Arab homophobe's eyes before a bright new world of alternative lifestyles. What we get, however, are three brief sketches from the narrator's memory of gay men he has known. Two out of the three are

French; one died of AIDS in the 1980s and all are depicted as sexually voracious and barely able to control themselves. Though the narrator admits to not knowing much about gay lifestyles, these vignettes do reveal another layer of convictions. Then comes the body hair again – how all these men are excited by mustaches, chest hair and the “animality” that it supposedly betokens. It is an ironic exaggeration but again in order to cast into relief and relativize difference, not quash it.

Rashid's exposure of his own obstacles to accepting homosexuality is the backdrop of his encounter with Joachim. When they meet, the pair enjoy a good rapport. It marks the next stage in the rhetoric of understanding. Here, Rashid frankly expresses to his colleague his views on homosexuality: the putative obsession with sex, the ephemerality and mere titillation of gay relations, the absence of female tenderness, the filth and insalubriousness of a wholly masculine environment, and its social sterility. In response, Joachim is depicted as a patient and honest explicator. Their activities together in Berlin are a positive experience. Joachim explains to him that sex is not generally the uppermost thing for people – gay or straight – in Europe, and Rashid experiences this when he regards women appreciatively in Berlin and is made to feel like a lecher. Joachim also shows him through his twenty-year-long relationship with his partner that gay relations are not essentially ephemeral. And when Rashid sees their immaculate and impeccably decorated apartment in Berlin, he is forced to revise his ideas on hygiene. Moreover, Joachim's gentle and generous partner, embodies exemplary tenderness. In all these ways, Rashid's boldness in asking difficult questions comes with the corollary that he be courageous enough to interiorize responses that do not fit his categories of perception. In this way, he comes to acquire a deeper understanding of Joachim. He learns that Joachim's relationship with his life-long partner is a lot like that of a straight couple, complete with commitments, obligations, temptations, and infidelities.

In learning to appreciate the human as opposed to specifically gay passions, frustrations and yearnings in Joachim, Rashid succeeds in understanding the alien subject position. Yet again, however, understanding reveals other still unresolved problems for Rashid. The visit to the gay couple's apartment corrects numerous misunderstandings but it provokes in him a concern for the social implications of institutionalized homosexuality, which Rashid distinguishes from the right to gay self-expression. Again, the same rhetoric of understanding unfolds: 1) recognizing maximum difference, 2) defamiliarizing one's own viewpoint, 3) frankly expressing this viewpoint and listening to that of the other, which no longer seems so strange; and, 4) understanding the plausibility of the alien position. In this turn of the dialectic, he muses about demographic crisis and the vitality of societies:

Of course, I'm not saying that the decline in Germany's birthrate is due to homosexuality; rather that the legalization of homosexuality goes hand in hand with this situation.

Here again, events will eventually respond to the frank expression of his point of view and it will be up to him to demonstrate the courage to understand them on their own terms.

But first, when the activities of the exchange program bring Joachim to Beirut, Rashid feels compelled to put Joachim in contact with women, preferably those who resemble boys.

The reader wonders whether this is not an instance of the heterosexual overstepping his limits, of trying to impose his views on the gay man as he had feared the gay man would do. Rashid's effort may seem intrusive – a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* in reverse. Yet here, precisely, is where dialogue as the interiorization of the other's viewpoint is most crucial. Can it occur without an intrusive aspect, a personal crisis? Rashid, I have tried to argue, succeeds in understanding the other only because he demonstrates the courage to undergo this crisis, to interiorize other beliefs – to let himself be intruded upon. By the same token, he assumes that Joachim possesses the same desire. Yet Joachim seems to care not at all whether Rashid actually questions his own heterosexuality. He employs what Rashid calls a different “alphabet,” the social codes of Western liberal ideology – freedom of conscience, the autonomy of desire, and absence of social coercion. Accordingly, he cannot accept to be imposed upon and we suspect that Rashid's appeal to drop this defense *is* perceived as intrusive from the liberal humanist standpoint. Which leaves open the question of what the liberal humanist “rhetoric of understanding” would look like.

The shift to Beirut, a city “chock-full of young men,” puts Joachim in close contact with the city's gay community. So it comes as one of life's little plot twists when we learn suddenly that Joachim, for the first time in twenty years, makes love with a woman. Nor is it a one-night fling. He is determined to father a child by her, and she shares his commitment. Thus to Rashid's concern about the demographic consequences of homosexuality, events respond by modifying the definition of “family.” Yet just as Rashid himself does not fundamentally change his beliefs as a result of the encounter, nor does Joachim. The solution to the problem of Joachim's commitment to his partner of twenty years is to split his time between both households. By the end of the narrative, Joachim is a gay man who is now also also a father. And Rashid is a straight Arab who now better understands the gay German. Not quite a sitcom ending perhaps, but an important expansion of consciousness through an identifiable rhetoric of understanding.