

Ideology and Arabism: the challenges of the university

by Chibli Mallat
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Le Silence de la Mer ('the silence of the sea'), 1942: the book was the most powerful cultural and literary expression of French opposition to occupation during the second world war. Written by Vercors, the pseudonym of Jean Bruller, one-time communist party activist, it remains the most famous literary memory of the years of occupation.

Vercors, a towering literary figure since that short novel, went on to establish one of the most creative publishing houses in twentieth century France, les éditions de Minuit, before his death in 1991.

Since Father Selim Abou, the rector of the Université Saint Joseph pronounced his speech on the annual occasion of the faculty meeting three weeks go, I have been haunted by the imagery of Vercors' short novel, which I read years ago. In *Le Silence de la Mer*, the author-narrator depicts the mute dialogue taking place between an educated Nazi officer and his silent host on whom he foists his presence during Germany's occupation of France.

My memory of the novel is understandably faint, but its lingering power has remained. I am not certain why, but the reflections of

Professor Abou have reawakened this reminiscence in a quasi-obsessive manner.

For nothing happens in *Le Silence de la Mer*. Page after page, the reader feels a heavy and muted presence in the Frenchman's house, while the German officer, graced with an immersion of Goethe's literature, and Beethoven's music, is unable to achieve a rapprochement with his unwilling host despite his rarefied aesthetics.

They share the most refined European culture, but opposite the German is silence. The barrier cannot be broken.

Although the occupation is not mentioned once, it is there, ever-pervasive, in the most oppressive form.

But I must try to make sense of my subconscious, and to offer elements of response to that obsession which, considering the ripples created in Lebanese circles since the speech, may be the sign of a wider feel of unease towards, or identification with, that speech. Selim Abou's reflections may be offering the outlines of a watershed in Lebanon's intellectual history.

And yet, there is little in the speech's learned construction which should have triggered the recollection of *Le Silence de la Mer*. The reader will find a patiently built, three-fold argument, developing around history, sociology and politics. In it is little silence.

On March 19 Sélim Abou, the rector of St Joseph's, Beirut, gave a speech to the university's annual meeting. Rarely in modern Lebanon has an 'academic' talk provoked such controversy – in the press, in politics and in education circles. Three weeks on, Chibli Mallat assesses the context and consequences of Sélim Abou's address. And – for the first time in English – we reproduce below part of the text of *The Challenges of the University*

In history, Abou's message is a call for addressing Lebanon's past in its *Mille Plateaux*, to borrow the title given by the French thinkers Gilles Deleuze (d 1995) and Félix Guattari (d 1992) to their groundbreaking philosophical tractatus, published in 1980, perhaps not coincidentally, at les éditions de Minuit.

'A thousand levels': this is the rich reality of Lebanon's history, and Abou argues for the need to reclaim, from within Lebanon, those

vast tracts of history which have been left to the research of foreign scholars.

I have experienced this void, as Abou aptly remarks, in more than just the Lebanese context. In my years at the School of Oriental and African Studies, I realised the richness of the whole field of Mesopotamian studies in Britain, France and the US. I have not stumbled, despite my better efforts, on anything near the amount of depth or width conducted

in Arabic, in Iraq or elsewhere.

In sociology, the call is for a defence of pluralism, which is an integral part of Lebanese identity. In some of the criticism levelled at that speech, the accusation has been directed, particularly by minister Jumblatt, at this part of Professor Abou's speech.

Walid Jumblatt's contention is that Selim Abou conjures up some of the extremist Christian leaders' veiled call, during the civil war, for secessionism in the name of Lebanese Christendom. I beg to differ with this reading, even though my legal apprenticeship suggests much more care before trying to force on Middle Eastern societies a common personal status code in the name of nationalism or secularism.

I am not as supportive as Professor Abou for Tunisia's proto-secular code, and noted once how the Iraqi integrated personal status code of 1959 was the first mark of the downside slope, in Iraq, towards the false unity we now have in this wretched country.

I have great attachment to a four-generation friendship between my family and the Jumblatts, but I would argue that Walid bey and Father Selim Abou are much closer to each another in their appreciation of the interface between the Lebanese mosaic of communities and their advocacy of secularism, than I am to either of their views. And then, the

third, most troubling part of the rector's speech, where the paltry, poor, and empty political discourse which surrounds us in this country is confronted with the exigency of truth, which Abou rests in the university.

I must confess that I cannot stand five minutes of news on Lebanese television, let alone of those endless interviews of local politicians. The reason is exactly what Selim Abou courageously spoke about: the emptying of fundamental words, like 'independence', 'sovereignty' and 'democracy' from their basic meaning.

A few years hence, hopefully when the situation in Lebanon will have stabilised as it should for a normal nation-state, I have no doubt that the rhetorical cacophony we have heard since 1990 will not be different from that of France between 1940 and 1944.

From all the speeches will remain nothing, but the sounds of embarrassed silence. Then, people will read Abou's speech as the articulate version of Vercors' *Le silence de la Mer*. For my part, perhaps lacking courage or literary ability, I might stick to silence.

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